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OLDBURY BY ANNIE KEARY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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OLDBURY.

BY

ANNIE KEARY,

AUTHOR OF "JANET'S HOME."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1874.

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ОБ АВТОРЕ И

OLDBURY.

CHAPTER I.

A Recognition.

Miss Berry and Elsie were the last of the party to reach the entrance to the tent, towards which Cecil led the way. Many of the guests had already entered, and were taking their seats at the long tables; others stood in groups round the door.

"Stay here," whispered Cecil to Elsie, "till I have taken Mrs. Lutridge and the rest of the Oldbury people in. I will come back for you and Miss Berry. You are to sit near us. We want you to hear the speeches. Don't stir till I come back."

The sun was shining full in Elsie's face, and in the hurry of starting in the morning she had forgotten her parasol. She put up her hand, as Cecil left her, to shade her eyes, and when the glare left them she perceived that the tall, grey-haired man, whom Steenie had pointed out as Gilbert Neale, was standing at a little distance from her looking at her intently.

He seemed to have broken off a conversation suddenly to stare at her, for a lady leaning on his arm looked up into his face with evident surprise.

The eyes that dwelt on Elsie's face were grave, inquiring eyes, with an expression of half recognition

and sad wonder in them. Elsie would have turned away if she could, but there was something in the look that awed her into stillness. Her heart began to beat very quickly, a desperate wild courage came to her, such as sometimes comes to very timid people in moments of great agitation. She could hardly restrain herself from ending the painful pause by stepping forward before all the bystanders, holding out her hand, and saying, "Uncle Gilbert Neale, I am Elsie Blake; I am 'little Alice.'"

She felt as if she had escaped a danger when Cecil's voice approaching showed her the opportunity was passed.

"I half expected Stephen would have found you out before I got back, I have been so long making my way through the crowd. I shall turn Mr. Neale over to you, Elsie. Miss Alice Blake, Mr. Walter Neale."

The introduction passed in silence. Mr. Neale put out his arm, and Elsie timidly approached the tips of her fingers. Before she touched it, she felt her hand roughly seized from behind and drawn back, and the elder Mr. Neale thrust himself between them. He did not make any apology for his action, he scarcely seemed to notice the surprised looks his nephew and Cecil turned on him, but he kept firmly hold of Elsie's wrist, while with the other hand on his nephew's shoulder he pushed him away from her towards the tent door.

"I will take charge of this young lady, Miss Russel; pray, go on with Walter. I beg of you to go on; you are stopping the way," he said in a quick, decided voice.

Cecil had just time to turn round and make a little mutinous gesture of vexation towards Elsie, and then the pressure of the entering crowd bore her onwards. Elsie lost sight of her, and found herself alone with Mr. Neale. He loosened his grasp of her wrist as soon as Walter and Cecil had disappeared, but he did not offer her his arm or move forwards in the direction where other people were moving. He stood still and silent, his eyes fixed on the ground, and his face, which had grown deadly pale all at once, working with emotion, fierce anger, or terrible pain, Elsie could not tell which; but glancing at him, she felt very cold and sick and frightened, as looks of Margaret's had once or twice made her feel before.

"I think I had rather not go into the tent," she said falteringly; "I don't feel well. I will go and sit somewhere on the grass in the shade till Miss Berry comes back, and then I will go home."

He turned towards her at the sound of her voice, and still without a word to her took her by the hand, and led her through the press of entering guests back to the quieter part of the garden. When they were quite clear of the crowd, he stood still and looked at her again.

"You, then, are Alice—Blake?" he said.

"Elsie—I am Elsie," she answered, putting forward her usual name as a plea against the anger the other seemed so strangely to call up.

The contraction on his brow relaxed, but his lips trembled more than once as he said in a softer voice:

"You should not have come here to-day; it was a

great mistake. Your grandfather should have known better than to allow you to come here to-day."

"He did not know. He—they are all away from Oldbury, and I am staying with the lady who brought me here. I never go anywhere when they are at home," pleaded Elsie.

"That is right; that is what I should have expected of them," he said, drawing her hand through his arm again, and preparing to walk in.

Elsie resisted, she was trembling so much. "I can't go any further; let me sit down here on the grass away from every one," she said.

"No; you had better come on with me to the house. Mrs. Neale might see you there, and that must not be. I will take you into my private room, and as soon as the party breaks up send your friends to you there."

"At once—let me go at once!" Elsie exclaimed, a little flush of indignation rising at the harshness with which she was treated.

"You had better consent to wait. I do not blame you for coming. It is unfortunate, but we must not give occasion for remark."

They walked on a pace or two in silence, and then he spoke again very gently.

"Have you ever heard of me? Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," Elsie said, quick tears springing to her eyes as she looked reproachfully up at him; "I do know. I have never been told, but I know. You are my uncle—my mother's brother. I have seen your name in her old story books. That was my cousin you pushed away from me."

"And you do not know why?"

"No."

There was another long silence, and Elsie saw how the stern face turned from her, twitched, and trembled. They were close to the house now; a glass door stood open. Mr. Neale led her through it, and across a wide passage into a room. As soon as he had closed the door behind them, he took both her hands in his, and stood opposite to her for a minute or two considering her face.

"You are like your mother," he said at last; "hardly at all like your father. You have not changed much in growing up. Poor child—poor child—poor little Alice!"

The stern grey face bent towards her, and Elsie felt a kiss on her cheek.

"Good-bye; I am not sorry to have seen you, my niece Alice. You have darkened what ought to have been the brightest day of my life with sad recollections, but I am glad to have seen you. Good-bye!"

The door closed behind him before Elsie could find a word to say. She sank down into the nearest seat and covered her face. It had been very terrible. What did it all mean? A strong sense of injustice kept her at first from feeling all the pain that her uncle's manner was calculated to cause her. She had not deserved to be so treated, she said to herself. She had dwelt on her mother's memory, and longed fervently to know her family, and thought about them, and dreamed of them all her life, and now at last here she was shut up like a prisoner in one room in her uncle's house, and forbidden to see any one. Margaret was right after all in keeping her shut up, if

such pain and humiliation as she had felt to-day were likely to result from her coming among other people. She would never try experiments again. The thought of the seclusion and monotony of home began to be welcome to her. Mr. Neale's gesture when he seized her hand, and the look that went with it, had given her a sort of horror of herself. She had done wrong in trying to escape from the shadow under which the others lived. Cecil's kindness and Steenie's love could not lift her out of it. They might make a warm bright glow of happiness outside, but she should be always snatched back away from them into the dark.

It was a long time before Elsie lifted up her head from her hands. When she did, her eyes fell on a portrait that hung on the wall just opposite to where she was sitting, and she gave a start of pleased surprise. She knew it in an instant. It was the original picture from which Margaret's miniature had been taken. The curls fell just in the way she knew so well; the sweet childish eyes laughed at her; the red lips parted just as if they were going to speak. The same feeling of love for the pictured face, and delight in it, came over her that she had had when she saw it first. She could not help holding out her arms to it, and speaking aloud: "Alice Pamela Neale. Mamma, mamma!" and then a burst of tears came and washed some of the despairing, frightened thoughts out of her heart.

It might be very foolish to be consoled because a picture seemed to smile at her, yet the sight did relieve Elsie's pain. She rose and walked across the room, and pressed her lips against the painted lips with a whispered "Dear mother." And when she got

down again, the room no longer looked like a prison to her; she had found an unexpected welcome, and she could not be angry that she had been taken there.

A servant came in soon afterwards, bringing her some refreshments. She could not eat, but she drank some water and bathed her eyes. Then she drew her chair to the window, and sat down to watch for the outpouring of the people from the tent, which would be the signal for her release. The time seemed very long. She tried hard to keep herself from thinking that there might be no traces of emotion on her face when Miss Berry came for her. By degrees the flower garden at which she was looking began to melt curiously into the green lawn and waving trees beyond. She fancied the chair she was sitting on turned round of its own accord, and began to move towards the wall. No, it was the picture on the wall that had stepped from its frame, and was coming towards her, smiling, radiant, with both hands stretched out; it stooped over her. Elsie felt warm lips pressed to her forehead, and started awake to find Cecil kneeling by the side of her chair, laughing at her bewilderment.

"No, I am not Grandmamma, though I daresay I look as careworn as any grandmother in England. I have gone through such terrible scenes since you left me. To think of your sleeping here so quietly while your friends have been suffering tortures on your account."

"What do you mean?" said Elsie. "Did not Mr. Neale tell you that I was tired and had gone to rest in the house?"

"Yes; and do you suppose we could rest comfort-

ably on such an assurance? Miss Berry and Steenie and I all jumped up together and wanted to go to you; and then Walter Neale—who is such a sheep, he must do whatever anybody else does—got up to follow. His uncle desired us all to sit still in such an awful voice. What had you done to him while he was with you, Flower Aspect? He might have seen Banquo's ghost, or Medusa's head, or anything, to judge by the look he brought back into the tent with him. We none of us enjoyed our luncheon, I can tell you."

"I could not help his coming here with me."

"I should think not, if he took it into his head. But are you sufficiently rested to cross the lawn to the bridge? Miss Berry wants to go home at once, and I shall be glad to slip away quietly, if I can manage it. Grandmamma and my uncle are to stay the night here. But Stephen and I think we have had enough of Connington. We have ordered the carriage to wait for us on the bridge. Can you walk so far?"

"Oh yes; I am longing to get home."

"Come then, and I will describe the terrible scene that has all but made my hair turn white as we go along."

"I thought you had told it me."

"Oh no; Mr. Neale's moodiness only affected a few people seated near him, but this involves all Oldbury. I can hardly help laughing now I think of it, but I really was frightened at the time. Stephen and Mrs. Lutridge have had such a quarrel, and all the Oldbury people heard it."

"What was it about?"

"I may as well tell you, for if I don't, some one else will. Mrs. Lutridge seems to have been in an evil temper ever since she came here to-day. She was talking in a loud aggrieved tone nearly all luncheon time, and at last we overheard your aunt's name, and found that Mrs. Lutridge was venting her anger by abusing her, and that she actually quoted Mr. Pierrepoint as her authority for some of the slanders she was promulgating. Stephen left his place at the upper end of the table and went and stood behind her chair till she had finished her harangue, and then said aloud before every one that he did not believe his father had ever made the statements attributed to him, and that unless Mrs. Lutridge would acknowledge that she had been mistaken, he must bring his father to confront her. You should have seen the dismay on Mrs. Lutridge's face. It was clear that her story would not bear investigation, and yet to get an acknowledgment from her that she was wrong was like dragging the very life out of her. She actually shed tears; but Stephen would not let her off for that. He was quiet, but very firm. I think he behaved very well, and I must say I admired him. When the Miss Tomkinsons, who had been drinking in the slanders delightedly, got up to go away, he begged they would wait till the question was settled; he was sure, he said, that they would be sorry to carry away a false impression. At last Mrs. Lutridge muttered a word or two into her handkerchief, about being sorry and mistaken, and Stephen repeated them after her loud enough for every one at the table to hear. How she will hate him all the rest of her life."

"Oh, I hope not!"

"Yes, she will. Think how she has lorded it over everybody all her life, and now to have to own herself wrong before all her satellites, and beg pardon at Stephen Pierrepoint's bidding. I am afraid she will never rest till she has done something to reinstate herself. If only some one of your name would steal or commit a murder, how pleased she would be! She would look upon it as a providential interposition to vindicate her judgment, and would not be at all surprised at its happening."

"Would you mind telling me what she said against Aunt Margaret? I can't imagine what she could say."

"It was very absurd. She accused your aunt of having at one time tried to inveigle Mr. Pierrepoint into marrying her; she said that he broke off all intercourse with your family abruptly because he heard some dreadful story against them. Mixed up with this there was a strange tale about some letters which your Aunt Margaret is said to have asked for at the post-office under a feigned name. It is all too silly to be believed even in Oldbury, yet I think Stephen was right, even at the risk of a disagreeable scene, to interfere to prevent such a story getting abroad."

"Did Mr. Pierrepoint hear anything of the quarrel?"

"No; he was seated at another table about half a mile away, talking to the Bishop. Steenie was quite prepared to bring him and the Bishop too on the scene, if it had been necessary. Luckily Mrs. Lutridge capitulated in time to save Oldbury the disgrace of having its quarrels brought under episcopal censure. Here is Miss Berry coming to meet us. She has been

crying her eyes out since Mrs. Lutridge's discomfiture. Don't allude to it again before her. We must do our best to restore her spirits."

It had indeed been anything but a day of pleasure to Miss Berry, and she did not disguise the satisfaction with which she turned her back on the scene of the entertainment.

"I know," she said, as she seated herself in a remote corner of the carriage into which Stephen handed her, "that everybody did everything with the best intentions; but oh, my dears! the whole day since we arrived at Connington, from the moment when I saw how Mrs. Lutridge's eyebrows were going, has been very awful. You may say what you please to me, Steenie, but I always shall think that Caroline's running out just when she did *was* an intimation, and to the last day of my life I shall be sorry that I did not attend to it."

CHAPTER II.

The Old Life again.

THE fortnight assigned for Elsie's visit to Miss Berry expired the next day; and when she came down in the morning, she found a letter from Margaret on the breakfast-table, informing her that she and Mr. and Mrs. Blake hoped to reach Oldbury early in the afternoon, and that they would like to find Elsie waiting for them at home when they arrived there. She gathered from the letter that her grandmother had been rather less well than usual during the last few days, and that Margaret was uneasy about the effect the journey might have on her.

Elsie glanced round Miss Berry's sunny little room as she put down the letter, and sighed, and then thought of her grandmother, and was very angry with herself for the momentary feeling of blankness that had come over her. She had made many resolutions about taking a brave heart back with her when she went home, and conquering her fears of her grandfather so as to make herself more of a companion to him, and winning her way into Margaret's confidence, and she chid herself for not being more eager to begin putting her plans in execution. Cecil came in as soon as breakfast was over, and talked over her departure as if it meant nothing more than lengthening the distance between them by the walk up the hill; but Elsie knew better, though she could not bring herself to say how certain she was that her grandfather's

and Margaret's return would put a stop to their intercourse altogether. Miss Berry consoled herself for her loss by commenting to Cecil on the improvement which the fortnight's visit had effected in her guest's looks; and, indeed, when Elsie came into the little room at the last moment with her bonnet on, and found that Stephen Pierrepoint, as well as Cecil, was waiting to walk with them up the hill, there was a brilliant bloom on her cheek that justified her friend's congratulations.

"Perhaps I ought not to have said anything about it," Miss Berry remarked penitently to Cecil, as they all four left the house together. "I have been thinking too much, perhaps, of how her sweet looks light up the house. 'Beauty is nothing after all, you know, but dust and ashes,' as Miss Tomkinson very properly reminded me yesterday when I repeated to her something some one had said about Elsie's complexion. It always disgusted her when people admired her for her looks, she said (I don't remember ever to have heard of any admirers she ever had, but I suppose she knows best about that herself), and now, when she sees a beautiful complexion, it only makes her think of the 'foul worm,' as the hymn says, 'that shall fret

'The skin that but yesterday fools would adore
For the smoothness it held, or the tint that it wore.'

It is very creditable to her to have such solemn thoughts, is it not, my dear? I am afraid I shall never attain to so much spirituality myself, and sometimes I venture to hope that it may not be *quite* necessary; for would God have made so many pretty young things if He meant us never to see anything but the 'foul worm' in them?"

Miss Berry walked rather briskly up the hill as she delivered herself thus to Cecil, and Elsie and Stephen fell a pace or two behind.

In spite of her resolve to keep up a brave heart, Elsie could not help pausing half-way up the hill to take a look back at the little house on the sunny side of the street she was leaving. "I can't understand how it is," she said to Stephen, "that there seems to be so much less sunshine on the top of the hill than there is down here."

Mrs. Lutridge, with her tract basket on her arm, pushed between them as they stood talking together, and walked majestically on without paying the smallest heed to Stephen's salutation.

"An open declaration of war," he said, laughing, as they turned to resume their walk. "It's a little overdone, for one does not exactly see what is to come of it. I wonder what harm she thinks her displeasure can do us?" He finished his sentence with an inquiring look into Elsie's face as he slightly emphasized the plural pronoun.

Elsie walked on a little quicker after this, to catch up Miss Berry and Cecil, who were waiting for them at the top of the hill.

"Are you going quite up to the house with us?" said Miss Berry to Stephen a little nervously, for the encounter with Mrs. Lutridge had not escaped her notice.

"To be sure we are," answered Cecil. "We are going to conduct the fairy princess back to her brazen tower, and break the spell by entering it in a body. I shall leave Oldbury happier, Flower Aspect, for having been inside your house, and satisfied myself

that it is not hung round with bells and enchanted mirrors, like lady Minnitröst's bower."

The workpeople in whose hands the house had been left, had exercised the discretionary power given them in a bolder spirit than Crawford had ever ventured upon. The dingy brown curtains in the library had been replaced by fresh green ones; the chairs and sofas covered with new chintzes. Elsie moved freely among it all. The walls of the rooms and the furniture no longer breathed out "Margaret, Margaret, Margaret," as she had always fancied that they did before. She even ventured to take her visitors to the study itself. Stephen took down the great books from the shelves and turned them over with irreverent hands, and talked and laughed in the old silent room, till the spell of its gloom seemed broken for ever, and Cecil put her slender brown hand deep down into the old purple scent vases, and drew out a handful of the faded *pot-pourri* leaves, which Elsie in her childhood believed had come from some very distant sacred place, and had regarded with a kind of awe.

At last Miss Berry discovered that they had spent an hour and a half in the house, and that they really must go away. Elsie walked down the garden with them, and there was another long delay, while Cecil explored Margaret's favourite high-terraced walk, and questioned Miss Berry about the distant points of view to be seen thence; and Steenie talked to Elsie a little incoherently about his disinclination to leave Oldbury this year, though he knew he ought to be in London pursuing his legal studies; and Elsie looked steadily away over the sunny landscape, and watched the shadows of the fleeting clouds on the distant hills,

not daring to turn her head and meet the eyes that were watching for a farewell look so closely. They worked their way round to the gate just in time to encounter Mrs. Lutridge a second time, on her return from her district.

"She is bringing the three Miss Tomkinsons home with her to lunch at Laurel House!" exclaimed Miss Berry. "What will they all say about our having spent the whole morning here? Dear, dear! they will know exactly how long we have been together."

"What business can it be of theirs?" said Stephen impatiently. "I wonder what event out of Oldbury would be startling enough to turn the Miss Tomkinsons' thoughts from watching their neighbours. If America were submerged, or we had news that all the crowned heads in Europe had been cut off simultaneously, would they talk of that and leave us alone for a few hours, do you suppose?"

Elsie walked slowly back to the house when her friends had left her. Empty as it was, it had never looked less solitary to her than it did now. She made haste to go into all the rooms, that she might learn them by heart under the new impression of them she had received. A little bow of bright green ribbon with golden stars on it, which had fallen from Cecil's dress, lay on the dining-room floor. Elsie ran to it, picked it up, and held it lovingly in her hand, and then let it fall on the carpet again that she might look at it there. So fresh, so dainty, so different from anything that had ever lain there before; so different from anything Margaret would have allowed to be there. In that corner of the sofa Cecil had sat for a moment; Stephen had stood there, where the patch of sunshine

fell on the floor—the house was full of them now; a new era had begun for it and Elsie. She ran upstairs to put away Cecil's ribbon in the drawer where her mother's miniature was kept, and then went out into the garden to gather some flowers to arrange in the one or two long-disused vases in the sitting-rooms. When she had filled them and restored them to their places, she looked round surprised at the new character given to the room by that trifling change.

"The house is alive now instead of dead," she said to herself. "What will Margaret say?"

She heard the sound of carriage-wheels approaching the house while she was still admiring her work, and ran out into the entrance hall to meet the travellers. To people who have known few separations, a meeting after ever such a short absence is a formidable thing. They find it difficult to imagine that the friends from whom they have lately parted will come back just what they were when they left them.

Elsie had this feeling strong upon her when she ran into the hall, but it was rather hope than fear of finding a change that made the few minutes of waiting full of suspense.

The first glance at Margaret's pre-occupied face, as she helped her father from the carriage, the first sound of Mr. Blake's complaining voice, restored the sense of familiarity. It was all the same—it was all exactly the same. The old life or the old death coming into the house.

Margaret left a silent kiss on Elsie's forehead as she passed on through the hall to the library with her father, and then Elsie heard her name called feebly;

and the chill went out of her heart as Mrs. Blake, a good deal paler and feebler than when she went away, tottered into her arms, and broke out into mingled expressions of pleasure at being again at home with Elsie, and of thankfulness that she had accomplished the journey.

Margaret returned from the study to assist Elsie in taking Mrs. Blake to her room. "Yes," she said, in answer to an alarmed look of Elsie's, "she is weaker than when she left home; the journey and the interview with our friends have been too much for her. We must get her to bed quickly, and perhaps she may be better to-morrow."

Mrs. Blake fell into a heavy slumber soon after Margaret and Elsie had helped her into bed. Elsie would have liked to remain by her side all the evening, but after a time Crawford came up and sent her away.

It was beginning to grow dark when she went down-stairs. Every trace of the late arrival had been done away with; the boxes and wrappers removed from the hall, the marks of the dusty footsteps even had been swept away. The pleasant-faced charwoman had departed to her own home.

Mr. Blake sat with a book on his knee in his usual evening place in the drawing-room, and Margaret was writing at the table, on the same sized sheets of paper, with the same sort of pens she always used. There was nothing about her to show that she had not sat writing there every evening for the last fortnight. She took Elsie's hand as she passed, and kissed her again; but she asked her no questions, and offered no

information about what had occurred during their absence from home. She meant the old life to begin again without any allusion to the break that had taken place in it. Elsie went and sat on a stool in the recess of the window that overlooked the garden, and bent down her head on her knees. Was it all a dream? Had she been asleep for a fortnight, and was she only now awake? Were Cecil and Stephen dreams, such as she had sometimes before conjured up and lived with for a time, and lost afterwards? When she looked up at her grandfather and Margaret she could half believe that this was so, and the sharp pain the thought brought with it almost made her angry, and awoke a revolt against Margaret's treatment of her, such as she had never felt before. It was hard, it was cruel. Elsie's reason took the side of pained feeling for once, and forced her to say this to herself; she had come back with such affectionate feelings in her heart it was hard to have them thrust aside, hard to be condemned to the still routine in which the others passed their lives, and yet to be made to feel that she was of so little importance to them, that they would not trust her with any real knowledge of their anxieties and interests. She was no more to her grandfather and Margaret than a piece of furniture in the house they were accustomed to see, she told herself bitterly; and yet she knew quite well that it was just those two who would oppose most strongly any effort that might be made by people who did care for her to draw her away from them.

There was such a deep stillness all through the house that she could hear every tick of the old clock on the library mantelshelf; it seemed to be a pulse

throbbing in pain all day and all night. How often she had listened to it! It was an old fancy of hers, that all the hearts in the house beat in time to it silently—in silent pain, she said to herself now; and that its inarticulate sound was the only expression of fellow-feeling which passed among them, linking them mutely together, beating out their still, sad, unsympathising lives day after day.

"Elsie, are you going to sit all the evening doing nothing?" Margaret said at last; "it is a very bad habit." And Elsie jumped up hastily, dragged open a drawer in the work-table near, took out a knitted couvre-pieds which Mrs. Blake worked at sometimes, and began taking up stitches that Grandmamma had dropped a fortnight ago.

Margaret's receipt for all manner of suffering was work. She could not have gone on living herself if she had not found employment of one kind or another for all her waking hours.

She put down her pen once or twice this evening, however, to look long and consideringly at Elsie as she bent over the knitting. "Poor child," she thought, "poor child. It has been bad for her—this escape from solitude and return to it again. She is changed since she went away. Her eyes have a new expression in them. What is it? Not that—I hope not that. She cannot have met any one to awaken that feeling. I will not frighten myself with the thought of such a misfortune to-night." And a softer look came into Margaret's face when she addressed Elsie again, and Elsie's tender heart relented to her all at once; and when she went upstairs, she busied herself till very

late in various arrangements that were meant to save Margaret trouble and promote her comfort, though she knew there was small chance of Margaret's perceiving they had been undertaken for her sake.

CHAPTER III.

Out on the Uplands.

MRS. BLAKE did not recover from the fatigue of the journey as her friends had hoped she would. She made no effort to leave her bed the day after she returned home; and when Elsie went to her on the following morning to help her to dress, she was shocked to observe a great change in her countenance. The doctor who was sent for pronounced that she had had a second stroke of paralysis in the night. Her case was not altogether a hopeless one, he said. The effects of the attack might pass off to a certain extent, as had been the case after her first seizure, but it was hardly possible she should ever again recover the full use of her faculties.

For a time Mrs. Blake's danger and suffering entirely occupied the thoughts of every one in the house. Margaret's time was much taken up in efforts to comfort her father, and thus the chief part of the attendance in the sick-room fell on Elsie.

Mrs. Blake's speech was impaired by this fresh access of illness; she could only bring out a few words at intervals painfully and slowly, but she understood what went on around her, and her poor drawn lips could relax still with an attempt at a smile when Elsie came near her.

During the first days of her illness Elsie could never leave her side for an instant, and had no room

in her heart for any thoughts that did not concern her; but time passed on, and no change came. It began to be acknowledged that no immediate change was likely to come. The duties of the sick-room arranged themselves into a regular routine; and as Elsie busied herself with them, or sat for long hours watching at the invalid's bedside, thoughts and interests of the outside world which had been peremptorily thrust aside, stole gradually back into her mind.

The Oldbury people were punctilious in sending to inquire after their neighbours when they were sick, however little they had liked them while they were well; and a good deal of Crawford's time was taken up in answering messages of sympathy that were delivered at the door day after day. Mrs. Lutridge's footman strode up the steps at least once in every twenty-four hours; and Miss Berry and her neighbours from the Rectory quite haunted the house.

Through the open window of the sick-room Elsie could hear Crawford's dry voice giving always the same answer to every one who called to inquire: "Mrs. Blake was no better, and neither Miss Blake nor Miss Elsie was able to receive visitors."

Sometimes when the door had been opened in answer to a knock which always made Elsie's heart beat quickly, though it came regularly twice a day, there was a little further parley, but it was invariably brought to a close by the same sentence.

Elsie heard Crawford declare in her most discouraging tone of voice that "Miss Elsie was busy in her grandmamma's room, and that she had orders

not to disturb her by taking up messages from any one."

She used to steal to the window on tiptoe and watch Stephen Pierrepoint, as he slowly walked down the garden, with a very helpless, imprisoned feeling. He would be tired of coming soon, she thought, or he would leave Oldbury; each day she excused herself for getting up to look by saying that it was most probably for the very last time.

On one occasion when she distinguished Cecil's voice as well as Stephen's remonstrating with Crawford at the door, she ran down-stairs determined to speak to them for one instant. As she passed the library Margaret came out (as if she were going to cross the hall to the drawing-room) and laid a detaining hand on Elsie's arm.

"We will both stand back till the front door is closed," she said; "we shall have no peace if we once begin to see callers."

Elsie shook Margaret's hand off hastily and ran back to Mrs. Blake's room. For a few moments she felt desperate enough to resolve to put on her bonnet, follow her friends down the hill, and see them once more in defiance of Margaret; but just as she was leaving the room her grandmother called her, and while she was attending to her wants the excitement that had given her courage to contemplate such a measure died away.

She could not forget the disappointment, however, or her sense of Margaret's unkindness; and in the evening, when Margaret sent her out at the usual hour to take the air in the garden, instead of walking up and down the gravel-walk she leaned her elbows

on the low terrace wall near which she and Stephen had stood together, covered her face with her hands, and indulged in a long fit of weeping. She was so disheartened, so puzzled, and the change from brightness to sadness had come so suddenly. She did not wish to be selfish and dwell on her own private disappointment when there was graver sorrow in the house, yet it did seem dreary that no one should know or care in the least what she was feeling.

She was very much ashamed of herself when the crying fit was over, and tried hard to bring her swollen eyelids into order before she returned to her grandmother's room.

"Poor child," Margaret thought when she gave up her seat by the bedside to Elsie on her return, and observed the traces of tears on her face.

Grief that could vent itself in a shower of tears had long seemed to Margaret a very slight thing, yet she took some unwonted care for Elsie's comfort before she left her. She turned her chair towards the window that her hot eyes might be refreshed by the evening breeze, and brought up a book from the library, advising her to make an effort to fix her mind on its contents.

Elsie let the volume fall from her hands when Margaret left the room, and made up her mind that Margaret could never have been very unhappy, or have cared much for any one in her life, or she would not suggest such a remedy for grief; and Margaret, as she closed the door behind her, reiterated her "Poor child!"

It seemed to her that there were so many descents on the road of sorrow from that shower of April tears to

the point of dry-eyed endurance where she had long stood, that looking back and measuring the distance, a very unusual spasm of self-pity came over her.

"*Child*—poor child!" she repeated the phrase again as she took her twilight walk up and down before the house, and pondered how she might save Elsie some of the rugged steps she had herself taken, by exercising watchfulness over her now.

A few more days passed, and a slight improvement in the state of the invalid somewhat comforted the hearts of the watchers.

Elsie felt almost happy on the day when her grandmother was lifted for the first time from her bed to a sofa, and was able to make her understand that she should like to have her knitting brought to her. She ran joyfully to the drawing-room to fetch the cumbrous piece of work that had been in hand so long, and which she had thought a little while ago would never again have another stitch added to it. As she was crossing the hall on her return, she heard the postman's knock, and a letter flew through the slit in the door on to the pavement at her feet.

She saw her own name in Cecil's hand-writing on the envelope, snatched it up and ran quickly upstairs with her treasure. Its arrival seemed just the sort of thing that ought to happen on such a happy day as this; an event that made the gladness she was feeling before overflow.

Mrs. Blake saw the pleasure in Elsie's eyes when she entered the room again, and smiled kindly at her.

"Nothing particular has happened, Grandmamma," Elsie said, answering the question in the eyes that the

lips could not frame; "only everything looks very bright to-day, and I am so glad of it."

She spent nearly half an hour arranging and holding the work so that her grandmother could put in a few stitches before she made any attempt to examine her letter; and even when Mrs. Blake bade her lay the work aside, and closed her eyes to rest after her exertions, she turned the envelope round and round, and felt its thickness, and guessed how many sheets it contained before she proceeded to break the seal.

A second letter fell out when she unfolded Cecil's sheet. She gave one quick, breathless glance at the large handwriting, and let it lie where it fell while she read:

"DEAR FLOWER ASPECT,

"This is worse a great deal than we expected. Sleeping Beauty's thorn hedge, or the folds of the serpent that encircled Thora, were not half such formidable obstacles to intercourse as the iron-faced dragon at your door who guards you. Do you really not wish to see me again? I don't know exactly how much longer I may remain in Oldbury. My father has returned to England, but he is too busy to send for me yet. There is a talk of his going out as Consul-General to Shanghai, and if he accepts the appointment he has promised not to leave me behind in England. He wants to take Steenie too, and there is a grand commotion going on about that at the Rectory. Flower Aspect, you have a great deal in your hands; my uncle Pierrepoint would go down on his knees to you if he knew your power. I wonder whether the thought of influencing a person's whole career in

life will make you feel as consequential as it would make me?

"I walk up and down the Rectory garden, wondering and planning. Suppose you and I should have a great deal to do with each other in the future, and should be talking about Oldbury together in some queer place at the other side of the world by this time next summer? I only say suppose. I was tyrannized over, and forced to consent to put in the note folded in mine. Of course I don't know what is in it, but I guess. If your dragon were the least bit less implacable, or if this Chinese question did not loom so large before us all, I would never have taken so much on myself.

"Your loving friend wherever I go, or whatever happens,

"CECIL RUSSEL."

The other letter, to which Elsie now turned, had no regular beginning:—"I did not mean to write to you," it ran; "I had so much rather have spoken the words you will now have to read. They were often on my lips when I was with you, but a promise I had made not to speak to you till your friends returned to Oldbury held them back. Now that I am free to tell you what I feel for you, I am afraid you will think I am choosing a wrong time to speak. Yet I can't bear to think of your being anxious and unhappy, and not claim a right to share your trouble by saying, 'I love you.' I have long loved you; and everything that concerns you is, and always will be, of the utmost moment to me. Now you know what I have been longing to tell you all the summer. I shall not ven-

ture to say more now. I will wait patiently to hear what hope you can give me; but don't let fears or scruples about other people's objections weigh with you till you have talked to me. Nothing will discourage me but your telling me that you don't care for me. All other objections I shall hope to overcome. Be true to me and yourself, and if you think you can return my love, let me know.

"Yours faithfully,

"STEPHEN PIERREPOINT."

Mrs. Blake did not open her eyes or speak to Elsie while she was reading. She sank gradually into one of the heavy sleeps in which so much of her time was now passed, and the afternoon sunshine faded out of the room, and the shadows of twilight stole in while Elsie sat still with the letters in her lap. She was not so much thinking as feeling. As she sat and mused, she turned over a leaf in her book of life which could never be turned back again. It was one of those hours that make a chasm in a life, dividing sharply the past from the future. The previous days and hours had been leading up to it, but to herself the change seemed to come in a moment. The timid preference she had hardly dared to look at, rose up at once into conscious, trustful, proud love. She laid her cheek on Stephen's letter when she had read it a second time, and then it was done—she had given herself away, her heart and her faith for ever; and whatever came of it, it would be impossible for her to call them back. No to-morrow could be to her the same as yesterday. Her thoughts did not turn to the picture of the future Cecil had suggested. Nor did she

vex herself just then with fears about difficulties and objections that lay in the way at present. She was wholly absorbed in the wonder of the change that had come into her inner life. She had been alone, and she should never be alone again. She had put her hands once for all into another's grasp; and life, and death, and the future beyond, everything wore a new aspect to her.

Mrs. Blake slept on while these thoughts passed through her darling's mind. Once in the twilight Elsie put up her hand and softly touched her cheek. She did so long to be able to open her heart to some one she loved. The movement disturbed the invalid's uneasy slumber. She moaned and muttered some half audible words, which Elsie bent down her ear to catch. It was something about Margaret.

"I shall not be here then. I shall be no hindrance to your going with him wherever he likes by that time, Margaret."

The distressed tones gave a painful jar to Elsie's feelings, and forced the conviction on her that she must not talk to her grandmother about her own happiness now.

Crawford entered at last, and dismissed Elsie from her long watch, telling her that her grandfather and Margaret were waiting tea for her down-stairs. She ran into her own room before she went down, took her mother's miniature from the shelf where it was kept, and held it close to the window pane that the little daylight that remained might show her the face.

"Mother, do you know that I want you more than I ever did in my life before?" she whispered, as she

pressed her lips to the smiling, childish lips. "I wish I had another picture of you. I wish I knew how you looked on the day that was like this day to you."

For the first time in her life she was almost sorry that the pictured eyes laughed up into hers so gaily, and that the white brow had no shadow of deeper thought on it than a happy child's might wear. She shut the case quickly, and ran down-stairs. The days were shortening now, and Margaret had the curtains drawn, and the lamp lighted early, and sat writing at the centre table all the evening. Elsie sat beside her with her work. She did not want to talk, but little smiles went in and out of her lips as she plied her needle diligently; and once or twice she put down her work and went to the window, and drew aside the curtain, and looked towards the town. She did not do it stealthily, as she had done on previous evenings. She looked and when she turned back to the room again there was a sort of radiance on her face. Margaret watched her in surprise. Elsie seemed to have laid aside her usual shrinking timidity. She returned Margaret's anxious gaze with a smile; and when they went upstairs together, she put her arms round her neck and kissed her as she had never kissed her before in her life.

The next morning brought some anxious thoughts with it. She followed Margaret about the house, whenever she was not wanted in her grandmother's room, longing and yet fearing to get an opportunity of speaking alone to her. In the afternoon, when Margaret was shut up in the library with Mr. Blake, Crawford, who had observed Elsie's restlessness, and who was more awake than Margaret to the ill effect that

close attendance in the sick-room was having on her health, persuaded her to go out for a walk. A message had to be conveyed to a village about a mile from Oldbury, where a woman lived whom Margaret was anxious to engage as temporary servant during Mrs. Blake's illness, and Crawford asked Elsie to undertake to deliver it while she sat with Mrs. Blake.

The prospect of a long solitary walk was extremely welcome to Elsie just then. The house felt oppressive to her, and she longed for the refreshment of the air and a quick motion. Her way did not take her through the town, but straight up by a steep road on to the downs, in a little hollow of which the village she was bound to lay.

The year had dropped down into another stage of autumnal beauty since Elsie had last left the town streets; there had been a good deal of rain during the previous week, and the turf under her feet was fresh and springy. She could not help bounding on lightly, and giving way to brighter thoughts as the brisk wind and the sunshine freshened her face. She transacted her business in the village quickly; but by the time she had climbed up to the ridge of the downs again the golden afternoon light was burnishing the green velvety sides of the sloping hills to a sheeny splendour, and filling all the hollows and ridges with hazy delicate lilac shadows. It was the prettiest hour of the day for that particular walk from the ridge of the downs to Oldbury. Elsie paused every now and then to look around her. How she loved the place! Could any spot in the world ever be as beautiful to her as Oldbury was now? The town lay below at her feet. Up here in the clear air of the hills it was as still and

solitary as if there were no town near. The smooth downs dotted with sheep rose above her; lower on the hill-sides were the bare stubble-fields, quite deserted now all the harvest work was over. The only human being in sight was a ploughman urging his team up a steep slope a long distance beneath her. In the course of the walk Elsie came to Margaret's favourite view, a sudden opening in the furthest line of hills where a clear-sighted person could catch the keen glitter of sunshine on the sea, very far away. She looked at it to-day with deeper interest than she had ever felt before. The objects round her were familiar and dear; that glitter in the horizon spoke of the unknown world and the hazy golden future that lay before her.

She gazed till her eyes were dazzled, and when she turned to continue her walk she did not see, just at first, the figure of a man approaching her on the field path. In another step or two she recognised Stephen Pierrepoint; a turn in the winding road had brought him in sight of her only a minute before while her back was turned; her heart gave a great bound, but there was nothing for it but to walk on. He came quickly up to her, and they shook hands timidly and shyly both of them, without looking in each other's faces, and then he turned back and walked by her side in silence for a few paces.

"Well," he said at last, in a voice which he tried to make firm, but the tremor of which Elsie heard, "what is it to be? What is the answer to my question?"

Elsie walked on a few steps further, seeing every blade of grass and the tiny eyebrights and lady's fingers peeping up between the blades at her feet;

then she stopped suddenly and held out both her hands. "You know," she said, raising her frank eyes full of love and trust to his face.

He read all he wanted to read in them, and drew her towards him and kissed her cheek. Elsie felt it a still more solemn seal to the silent promise she had made when she laid her face on his letter the evening before.

It was a strange dreamy walk they had down the hill after that, hand in hand. Sometimes talking on that inexhaustible theme for lovers, the beginning and history of their mutual love—a very few words, a question or two, and they had made it take in all their lives, and intertwined their past as closely as they believed they should connect their future; sometimes walking along side by side in a silent wonder of happiness they feared to disturb. It was not till they reached the stile leading out on to the highroad close to Oldbury that Elsie dropped down from the cloud-world she had been walking in, and thought of the practical difficulties she had to encounter.

"Aunt Margaret," she said, beginning to walk on a great deal quicker; "what shall I say to her when I get home? How shall I tell her?"

"I thought the first doubtful word would have been 'Mrs. Lutridge,'" Steenie said, playfully. "I hoped it would be, for I am prepared with arguments to talk that difficulty down. Nay, don't hurry on so fast; we are getting close to your home, and you have not said a word yet on the most important subject of all. When am I to see you again? You are not going to shut yourself up in your brazen tower and keep me out, as you have done all this last month. How I have

watched and waited, and miserably wandered about everywhere, for the blessed chance of seeing you that has come to-day! It frightens me to think I might have had to go away without it. I believe you would never have taken any notice of my letter. I have a sort of feeling about you that you might be spirited away beyond ordinary means of communication. I shall never feel quite secure of you but when I have hold of your hand."

"I had rather you let it go now," said Elsie, "for we are close to Mrs. Lutridge's garden gate, and here are the Miss Tomkinsons coming up the hill to take their regular evening walk. They have seen us already."

"So much the better; before night every one in Oldbury will know that I am the happiest man in the world, and have won the greatest prize in the world; and the warfare of tongues, of which we must bear the brunt, will have begun. Dearest, you don't mind, it is only the natural consequence of living in Oldbury. Nay, if you look so downcast, I shall grow frightened and refuse to let you go into the house till you have sworn not to throw me over because Mrs. Lutridge comes and scolds you."

"I am not thinking of her. I am thinking of something Aunt Margaret said one day. I can't forget her face and the tone of her voice when she warned me against making friends, or attaching myself to any one here. She said it would bring nothing but suffering."

"It shall not. What a horrible idea, that my love should bring suffering on you! Will you not take my word instead of hers, that it shall not? Thank you for smiling again. If there are to be difficulties, at

all events let us trust each other. You must not let your aunt or any one talk you into unsaying what you have said to-day. You will trust me! Promise."

"There is no use in promising," said Elsie; "I can't help trusting you now; if I love you I must trust you."

"And you do love me—now, and always." They were standing at the entrance-gate to the Blakes' garden by this time, and he took both her hands in a strong clasp.

"Good-bye!" said Elsie. "Please don't come further than the gate now; I want to go in alone, and have just to-night to think it all over quietly without any one questioning me."

She ran down the garden path till she reached the turn that shut out the road, and then she slackened her pace. There was the house, the blinds of the sitting-rooms drawn down to keep out the sun, just as she had left them, the blown-down branch of honeysuckle she had meant to nail up next morning straggling over the door; but was it an hour or a hundred years since she had seen it last?

As she came close to the house she heard the unusual sound of voices coming through the open drawing-room window. She paused for one moment on the door-step; the tones, but not the words, reached her ears. Aunt Margaret's voice, clear, a little more raised than usual, with something of anger or indignation in it; and then a deep, stern man's voice answering her.

Afraid of overhearing what was not meant for her, she opened the door softly and entered the house.

CHAPTER IV.

Perplexity.

THE weeks that had passed so sadly with Elsie, had brought Cecil also some anxieties, the most serious anxieties that had as yet come into her prosperous life. Her visit to Oldbury had been prolonged far beyond the limits first assigned to it; and though her father was again in England, he had not sent for her to rejoin him. "He was so overwhelmed with business," he wrote word to her, "that even her company would be a distraction he could not at present permit himself." The offer of an important official appointment in the East had been made to him; and though he consulted her about his plans, and promised her that if he went abroad for any length of time he would take her with him, he did not hold out any hope of their meeting till after the important decision should have been made.

Cecil longed inexpressibly to see her father. She was seized with a fit of restlessness and anxiety which made her very unlike her usual self; and she fancied that one of her old confidential talks with her father would set her right again.

She spent a great deal of her time, as she had told Elsie, in walking up and down the Rectory garden, making plans for the future; but she found, to her dismay, that under whatever aspect she contemplated the new prospects opening out to her, they

would not look as bright as she wished to see them. A sense of dreariness would come over her, whether she pictured her father, herself, and her cousin with Elsie as his wife, all setting forth together to make a new home in a distant land, among unfamiliar scenery and faces; or whether she thought of having her father all to herself, and leaving the two in whose concerns she had interested herself all the summer, to go on with their story by themselves without any further question of her in it.

"It would be best; yes," she said to herself, "it would certainly be best to have them with us; and yet it would not be the old home party. There was no use disguising that four could never be the same as three; there would be a division, a split into coteries." Cecil saw very clearly how her life would be affected by the change. There would be her father absorbed in his work, even to a greater extent than he had ever been before, able only at rarer intervals to give her the chance word and smile, the precious half-hour's talk, that were the prized events of her days, and between times there would be no gay bantering brother-and-sister intimacy to give zest to all her employments, and bring a home-like feeling into the house.

Stephen might be there ever so much, but the equality between them and the community of interest would have departed. There could never be again the outspoken, eager talk between them that had once, as far as Cecil was concerned, satisfied every intellectual want; the playful, unrestrained criticism of each other's doings; the endless dissections of their own and their neighbours' characters; the sudden

chance plunges into grave discourse, in which deeper feelings and aims were mutually revealed. It had been very pleasant; but it could not go on under the new circumstances she was thinking about. Elsie and Steenie, sharing a distinct life of their own, would have stepped on to quite another stage of existence, in which she should have no part.

"Well," Cecil said to herself, "one cannot remain the same, however hard one tries; this is growing up, and it is a much drearier process than one is prepared for. Ah! there is a great green caterpillar on that lilac leaf, wriggling itself out of its last skin, before it settles down into a chrysalis." She paused in her walk before the lilac bush to look at it. "It does not seem particularly comfortable. What pangs, what struggles, what an agony it costs this senseless insect to free itself from one outgrown case after another till it reaches a larger life at last! A human soul may well suffer something in throwing off the habits and thoughts of childhood, and setting itself to new relationships in place of the old. It is not a thing to wonder at, or quarrel with oneself for."

A month ago Cecil would have carried off the leaf and the caterpillar to show them to Steenie, and they would have fallen into a discussion on the appropriateness of her comparison, but now he never seemed to be in a mood for such discussions. She walked on, continuing her solitary reverie; and, in spite of the caterpillar, her thoughts would fly back longingly to the past. Oh those old holiday and college vacation times, when she had felt herself such a queen of hearts, with her father and Steenie and

Walter Neale, all vying with each other in devotion to her! — when it had been who could secure the largest amount of her attention, and think first of what would please her. How jealous poor Walter Neale had been over every look and word and smile of hers; and how she and Stephen had laughed at him and teased him. The recollection gave Cecil a little pang now. No relenting towards young Neale, but a faint glimmer of a thought that one might come to long for a kind look and thoughtful word oneself, and that such a want was not exactly a thing to make sport of. Was it in her to love power and service too much, and be base enough to turn true affection into food for selfish vanity? If so, the best thing that could happen to her would be to have to go away into the wilds with her father and Elsie and Steenie, and learn to be satisfied with just the degree of importance that their pre-occupation disposed them to accord her. Well, there was no use staying out any longer. There was a touch of wintry keenness in the air already, crisping up the leaves and tumbling the red apples on the grass in the orchard. How the garden had changed since she came first to Oldbury in the bright early summer-time!

Stephen had set out on one of the long rambles in which he spent the greater part of his time now, and Mr. Pierrepoint had shut himself up in his study and did not wish to be disturbed: but there was Lady Selina, a little querulous at the thought of the approaching separation from her son-in-law, Sir Cecil Russel, whom she had not hitherto seemed to value much; and there was Miss Berry alone and somewhat out of spirits in her house over the way. Cecil ran

in to spend the rest of the day in various efforts to enliven them both.

There had been storm-clouds hovering in the atmosphere of the Rectory for some time past. It never was quite a safe, genial, home air that pervaded that house; there were always electric currents in it that a very little movement would bring into dangerous collision. When she first came to Oldbury, Cecil had found it rather an amusing trial of skill to aggravate or smooth down the little jars that were apt to arise when books, or politics, or any of the questions of the day were discussed between the father and the son. Of late she had observed that these disagreements, let them begin about a matter of ever so little importance, had a tendency to lengthen out and grow serious, and rouse deeper feelings than she had power to calm. She began rather to dread arguments on "Tracts for the Times," or the "Vestiges of the Creation," in which the disputants seemed after a time to lose sight of the original question, and to be aiming shafts at particular views or plans of life which each attributed to the other, and did not like to speak about quite openly. Instead of mischievously introducing vexed questions, Cecil now spent an anxious half-hour each morning hiding away every book or paper that could suggest a dangerous topic, and all the evening she exerted herself to avert collisions. When she succeeded, she perceived with surprise that neither father nor son were particularly obliged to her. They were, in reality, too full of each other, and of the plans for the future which each believed the other was revolving in his mind, to be content to let the conversation glide easily on indifferent topics.

Arguments, quarrels even, which let glimpses appear of the speakers' real state of mind, were far more interesting, and brought them really closer together.

Mr. Pierrepoint had been too long accustomed to live among his intellectual inferiors, and to have all his opinions accepted unquestioningly, to be very patient of discussion; and yet he had a fidgety anxiety that his son's opinions should on all points coincide with his own, that never allowed him to let a remark he did not agree with pass without comment. It was a question of honour with him, as well as one of conscience, that his son should espouse the side in theological controversies to which he himself was bound. He had inherited his allegiance from his father, whose name had been eminent among the leaders of the Evangelical party in the Church, in the days of its first fervour and influence. It was a name very apt to be quoted on Exeter Hall platforms still, and was held by a section of the religious world to be a guarantee for its possessor's unfaltering acceptance of shibboleths that were held to be bulwarks of what was already beginning to be called the old faith. Mr. Pierrepoint had felt the obligation himself, and for some years the chief force of his mental energies had been directed to the task of moulding his thoughts, and squaring his convictions to fit certain grooves. It had cost him so much to come at some of his conclusions that he was proportionately angry when they were assailed. He was in the position of a man always in fear of being robbed of the result of hard toil, and a chance word would sometimes raise a storm in his mind. He had sent his son to Cambridge

instead of to Oxford, to avoid the danger of his receiving a bias in theological questions contrary to his own; yet in spite of all his precautions, whenever anything like grave talk came up between them, some word was sure to be said which showed that his son's sympathies for the most part went with the very men whose influence in the Church he had set himself to combat.

It is undoubtedly a very severe trial which comes to many people about middle life, when they discover that the predominant current of thought, that which they themselves have unwittingly helped to form, is bearing the young of their generation to a standpoint different from their own, and that in sentiment and opinion there is a wide gulf fixed between themselves and those for whose sympathy and concurrence they most ardently crave. It is very difficult for the elders not to feel their descendants and pupils traitors to them, and still worse to the truths which they have cherished, and which they believed they were bringing them up to fight for. Only a very few have strength of sight to discover the old principles alive, and active still under the new forms. Mr. Pierrepoint certainly was not one of these far-sighted people. He had never quite faced the thought yet that his son was a grown-up man, and must be expected to think without his guidance, and choose an independent path in life. He had mapped a career out for him himself, and he did not choose to know that the young man's own wishes pointed in an entirely different direction. He wanted him to remain some years longer at Cambridge till he had become disposed to take holy orders, and

had adopted his father's side in Church questions. Then he hoped he would come and live at Oldbury, marry suitably (that is to say, in a rank a little higher than his own, as he himself had done), and eventually succeed to the living of Oldbury. It never struck Mr. Pierrepoint that there was anything of a worldly spirit manifested in these plans. He took it for granted that inward conditions suited to the outward state he pictured would in due time be brought about.

The spiritual call to the ministerial work would doubtless be felt, the right amount of affection for the well-born and richly-dowered bride would spring up. He presupposed all that, and allowed his thoughts to hover round the pleasant, easy, outside circumstances mainly. It had grown to be too dear a castle in the air to be easily given up. Yet for the last two months hardly a day had passed during which Stephen had not expressed some intention or made some remark which showed on how insecure a foundation it was built, and how near the hour of its final shattering might be.

Two very decided blows had been aimed at this favourite scheme within the last few days. One came in the shape of a warning respecting Steenie's attentions to Elsie Blake, with which Mrs. Lutridge had not failed to favour him. The other was Sir Cecil's proposal to take Stephen to China with him as his private secretary. He had been in a pitiable state of mind since Sir Cecil's letter came. Of the two threatened evils, it seemed to him that one might be used to avert the other, but he could not make up his mind to which he could reconcile himself most easily. He was walking up and down the library

debating this problem with himself while Cecil soliloquised in the garden; and it must be confessed that it was mainly on himself, on how the events he dreaded would affect his own life, that he pondered. It would be a great pang to him to resign finally all prospect of having his son associated in work with him, living close to him during the declining years of his life. He had had that design in his mind ever since the boy was born. He had been unconsciously making over to the ideal companion and prop of his old age a good deal of the fatherly affection which did not flow out quite readily towards the high-spirited lad whose gaiety oppressed him, or the argumentative youth who questioned his opinions. He might almost as well have never had a son at all, as give up that prospect of what he was to be to him in the future. No, he could not let him go so far away. Yet he saw clearly that if he exacted of his son the sacrifice of this opening in the career he preferred to every other, he must make some concession on his own part. Steenie might give up his wish for foreign service, might be satisfied to remain in England if his love prospered, hardly if he were thwarted in that too. Mr. Pierrepoint's steps quickened as thoughts crowded into his mind. Steenie married to Elsie Blake, living here, in this house in Oldbury. He tried to bring the picture before his mind to see how he could bear it, and then, all at once, instead of Elsie's fair timid face by his son's side, there came before him Margaret's, with the pitying proud smile on the lips and in the eyes he had never been able quite to forget since the day she had turned it on him. The contemptuous, hateful smile, he called it; for, half un-

consciously to himself, during all these years the offence had rankled.

He stood still, and gazed out into the garden towards the spot where the quiet, well-remembered little scene had been acted. To be brought into constant contact with Margaret Blake, or to let his son go away from him, which would be the least intolerable? He had not answered this question, or come to any understanding with himself, when he heard a sharp, well-known knock at his study door, and, unannounced, according to old practice, Mrs. Lutridge walked in.

Mr. Pierrepoint pushed his hair back from his forehead and sighed. Experience had taught him the uselessness of attempting to get rid of his present visitor till she had said every word she had come prepared to say. It was an infliction that must be borne. He drew forward the visitors' chair, worn into a hollow by Mrs. Lutridge's weight during the many hours she had sat prosing in it, and prepared himself for the inevitable avalanche of words.

It did not begin as immediately as he had expected, and he looked for the first time at his visitor's face. There was actually a faint shade of embarrassment on it, an expression as if she had something to say that she had a little pain in entering upon.

Mr. Pierrepoint remembered to have seen something of the kind in her twice before. Once when she had come to consult him, after receiving news of her son's misconduct at Cambridge, and once when she had opened her heart to him about the disagreements between herself and her daughters that were beginning to be the talk of the town. It had not been exactly the Mrs. Lutridge known to all Oldbury,

who boxed the ears of charity boys and scolded improvident matrons, that had sat opposite to him on those occasions. It had been a worn woman with a dejected, wrinkled face, and a voice that had shrill quavers and deep sobs in it as she spoke. Here she was again, fixing anxious eyes on him, and Mr. Pierrepoint had only one thought.

He leaned forward in his chair and spoke kindly. "I trust that no trouble at home brings you here to-day. I trust your son——"

He had made a mistake. The anxious look went out of Mrs. Lutridge's eyes, and a twinkle of malicious triumph came in its place. At the bottom of her heart she was sorry for what she had to tell Mr. Pierrepoint that day, but she had not forgotten the pain his parental vanity in his son's success had often caused her when she was weeping over the disgrace of hers. It was not in her nature not to give him back a blow for all those blows, now she had him in her power.

"Not *my* son to-day," she said, placing a large wrinkled hand solemnly on Mr. Pierrepoint's knee. "No, *I* have only cause for thankfulness to-day, that my precious only son, guided by my advice, has escaped the snare into which I grieve to see yours has fallen; but I know what are the pangs of a parent's disappointment, and I come to warn, or rather, I fear, to condole with you."

Mr. Pierrepoint pushed his chair an inch or two backwards. He did not much like the heavy fat hand on his knee, and he strongly resented an insinuation that placed his son on a level with Richard Lutridge.

"I really don't understand you," he said stiffly.

"I am not aware that there is any subject in connexion with my son which calls for condolence."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge, raising her hands. "My dear sir, this is even worse than I thought. 'The serpent's tooth indeed!' But as you yourself so beautifully said to me when I was in trouble, 'Must not all the idols we make to ourselves be dashed to the ground?' You are severely tried. Nothing so painful has as yet, I am thankful to say, occurred in my household. It is too bad that your only son should treat you with such disrespect as to engage himself to be married without your knowledge! The whole town is talking of his engagement to Miss Elsie Blake, and you are still in ignorance! I feel for you, my dear friend, I feel for you." Again the heavy hand descended, but this time Mr. Pierrepoint fairly shook it off.

"Really, my dear madam, you are exciting yourself quite unnecessarily. Nothing of the kind you allude to has occurred. It is some foolish report you have heard. I shall inquire of my son himself, and——"

"It is time you did," interrupted Mrs. Lutridge sharply. "The whole town knows more about your son's affairs than you do. He calls at her house every day. I have reasons for knowing that letters have passed between them; and only yesterday the Miss Tomkinsons, coming up the hill to spend a profitable evening with me, met your son and the young lady walking— But really I could hardly persuade poor Miss Tomkinson to describe the very familiar way in which they were walking together. It distressed her so that she could not recover her spirits all the

evening. However, it was not of your son's engagement with Miss Elsie Blake I came to speak. I presumed you were as well informed on that matter as I am. I have a still more painful subject to bring before you. I came to open your eyes to the character of the people with whom you are about to be connected. Dear friend, prepare yourself for a terrible shock."

"I believe I know as much about the Blakes as any one in the town," said Mr. Pierrepoint quietly, "and I have always considered them to be very worthy people."

"But do you—have we any of us in Oldbury ever known who and what they are? I am sorry to say I am now in a position to inform you."

"Well, who and what are they?" asked Mr. Pierrepoint, with a gleam of anxiety in his eyes.

"Jesuits in disguise!" exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge solemnly. "Concealed Jesuits! and for fourteen years they have rented a pew in your church. No wonder our young people go astray!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Pierrepoint, startled out of his self-command by the absurdity of the charge.

"Jesuits in disguise!" reiterated Mrs. Lutridge; "or escaped convicts—most assuredly they are one or other of the two. I do not speak without warrant; I bring proofs that I am right."

"In which accusation? Your proofs can hardly apply to both, can they?" asked Mr. Pierrepoint, with the touch of sarcasm in his voice which he sometimes permitted himself when a very flagrant instance of Oldbury absurdity had to be dealt with.

"Yes, they can," said Mrs. Lutridge defiantly; "for who but Jesuits in disguise, or convicts, or con-

spirators of some sort, ever are guilty of living fourteen years in a place under a feigned name, and of having letters with two directions sent to them? Look at these!"

As she finished speaking Mrs. Lutridge mysteriously drew from her pocket two empty envelopes, which she placed one below the other on the table. The larger was directed, "Mr. Blake, Hill Cottages, Oldbury;" the other, which seemed to have fitted inside it, bore the inscription, "C. Le Fevre, Esq. To be forwarded."

Mr. Pierrepoint just glanced at them and then pushed them aside.

"By what means did these papers come into your possession, may I ask?" he said gravely.

"By means which I considered myself perfectly justified in employing," she answered, all the more stoutly because she did feel a little uncomfortable under the questioning look Mr. Pierrepoint turned on her. "It was for your sake I exerted myself to obtain them, my dear friend—solely for your sake. Ever since that day at Connington, when my eyes were opened to what was going on, I have been on the alert; and I grieve to say that an accumulation of proofs that my suspicions of the Blakes are but too well founded crowd upon me. These letters are not all, or even the chief part, of what I have to lay before you. Miss Tomkinson's brother, who is, as you know, surgeon to the convict prison at Dartmoor, has been staying in the town lately. He used long ago to be Dr. Hale's visiting assistant; and one day last week, when our good doctor was too ill to make his usual rounds, he asked Mr. Tomkinson to attend one or two urgent cases. He called at the Blakes, and the

instant his eyes fell on Miss Blake he recognised her as a person who was once taken ill in the prison when she came to visit one of the convicts. He was called in to attend on her. She had fainted, and hurt herself in falling. Do you not remember an illness of Miss Blake's some years ago, which led to a great deal of conjecture and talk at the time?"

Mr. Pierrepoint did remember, and all at once old puzzles, words and looks of Margaret's that had perplexed him years before, came back upon him with painful vividness. He made an effort to put the growing conviction away.

"All you have told me may admit of very simple explanation," he said; "and you should be careful not to spread injurious reports that may cause great pain to innocent people."

"It was entirely for your sake I concerned myself in the matter," Mrs. Lutridge exclaimed. "I believe I am the last person in the town to whom a want of Christian charity can be fairly attributed, but I have always held that Christian charity should be tempered by vigilance. Dear friend, you will find I am right, and that this unhappy engagement will have to be put an end to."

"But there is no engagement," objected Mr. Pierrepoint.

"Your son is at the Blakes' house this moment; I saw him turning in at the gate as I came down the hill," urged Mrs. Lutridge.

Mr. Pierrepoint groaned.

"I am, however, still convinced," he said, after a pause, "that matters have not proceeded so far as you suppose. Pray put a stop to the talk in the town, for

Miss Blake's sake quite as much as for my son's. Assure every one that there is no question of an engagement between them."

He spoke a good deal more confidently than he felt, as Mrs. Lutridge judged by the flush on his cheek, and the uneasy tone of his voice, but she did not wish to irritate him by further persistence.

"Well," she said, rising to take leave, "we will hope for the best, and whatever happens, remember you have me to rely on. *I* am here, ready to take any unpleasant office on myself that might be inconsistent with your dignity. I will see the girl's friends, should they persist in encouraging her in her presumption after your wishes are made known. I will make inquiries. Whatever difficulties you may have you may be sure that I shall not fail you."

At last she was gone, and Mr. Pierrepoint had the room to himself to pace restlessly up and down. His eyes fell on the envelopes as he passed the table, and he crushed them up in his hand and tossed them away to the furthest end of the room. He was very much disturbed; he could not get over the painful impression Mrs. Lutridge's story had made on him, and he dreaded the scene he expected to have to go through when his son returned.

The afternoon wore away to evening before Steenie came in, and each hour of waiting and thinking made the interview he had in prospect seem more formidable.

He was so absorbed that he did not after all hear the sounds he was watching for when they came.

Cecil, who was watching too, heard the front door open, and Steenie's step in the hall, and ran downstairs to give him a playful warning of Mrs. Lutridge's long interview with his father. The words were on her lips, and she was close to him beginning to speak them, before she looked up into his face. "O Steenie, imagine," she began, and then she paused, and the colour died out of her cheeks as she met his eyes. She thought she should hardly have known him for the same person who had gone out a few hours before in such brilliant spirits, there was such a terrible look of misery in his face.

"Let me pass," he said, in a voice quite unlike his own; and when she would have detained him to ask one more question he put her aside, and strode up the stairs, and she heard him lock himself into his room.

At dinner-time he did not appear, though Mr. Pierrepoint sent up repeated messages to beg him to come. It was altogether a wretched evening at the Rectory. At dinner hardly a word was spoken, and afterwards Cecil wandered miserably about the house longing to be of use, and to understand what was the matter, and yet not daring to question her uncle, who shut himself up in his study directly the meal was over. Lady Selina took herself off to bed early, in displeasure at finding no one at leisure to attend to her. Quite late Stephen came out of his room, and went into the study, in compliance with a summons from his father. Cecil could not keep still. She could not help hovering about the hall and staircase to catch an occasional sound of their voices. They were talking continually in low tones, not quarrelling, she was

sure of that, though now and then a word in a higher voice of almost agonized entreaty or pain would be heard above the others.

It was quite dark when Stephen left the study at last. He tried to pass Cecil again in the hall, but this time she would not be repulsed.

"Let me come with you into the garden," she said entreatingly; "just for one turn. O Steenie! I cannot bear to go to bed without hearing something. Let me come."

He drew her hand through his arm gravely, and they went out; but still he was silent. They paced the length of the elm walk without a word.

"Steenie! Steenie!" she exclaimed at last, as a gleam of moonlight showed her his face again; "I can't bear to see you look like that. Tell me something; have you seen her to-day? I don't think you ought to look as you do for anything but her being dead."

"She is not dead then," he said, in the same harsh voice that had frightened her before.

"But what is wrong? Are you not engaged to her? I thought you were last night."

"So did I last night."

"And now. O Steenie! you are not going to give her up because of anything Mrs. Lutridge said to my uncle this afternoon!"

"I did not know she had said anything."

There was evidently no use in cross-questioning him further. They took several more turns in silence, and Cecil's heart sank each time she had an opportunity of studying his face. She had not known before it could wear such a look. All the youth and bright-

ness seemed to have gone out of it. It was all at once a grave, sad, stern man's face.

As they were re-entering the house he looked towards her, and caught one of the pitying glances she turned on him.

"It is very hard on you," he said gently; "very hard to leave you in suspense, after all your goodness and your love to her. Try to see her while I am away. She will know how much she can tell you, or, at all events, it will comfort her to see you."

"You are going away?"

"Yes; you will be glad to hear this. I am going to see your father. I don't know whether it was right or wrong, but I have promised to consult him; to tell him everything. It was the only promise I could make that would at all satisfy my father, or give him any comfort."

"You have not quarrelled with him? He is not angry?"

"Angry! no; why should he be? What is there to be angry about? It is beyond anger."

"At all events, I am thankful Papa is to know. I can't fancy anything so wrong that he cannot make it right when it is brought to him," she said cheerily. She did not get the look of acquiescence from Steenie she hoped for. He held the door open for her to pass in, and then turned back into the dark garden.

Cecil listened for a long time up in her own room, but after all she was obliged to go to bed, and she fell asleep before she heard him enter the house.

"He has been pacing up and down the gravel walk all night," she reflected with dismay, when the shutting of the front door awakened her out of an uneasy slumber in the early dawn of the next morning.

CHAPTER V.

The Bursting of the Storm.

ELSIE went upstairs to her grandmother's room on her return from her walk, without venturing to look into the drawing-room, where Margaret was shut up with her visitor.

The strangeness of Margaret's having a visitor did not occupy her thoughts after the first surprise was over, as it would have done a few hours before; she was too full of her own happiness. She thought more of the disappointment of finding Mrs. Blake asleep when she entered her room. She had not made up her mind what she should say to her, whether she should tell her news to her or to Margaret first. It hardly seemed right to bring so much excitement to the sick-bed, yet she would have liked her grandmother to be awake, and see the joy in her eyes, and say some one of the tender, sympathising words that always came from her lips when her darling seemed more than usually happy.

Elsie was too restless to sit still, and her grandmother's slumbers were too profound to be disturbed by her light movements about the room. As she wandered up and down between the window and the bed, she discovered that it was not all joy, not the mere tumult of joy, that agitated her so; there was a large mingling of fear and anxiety in her feelings, and the

more she thought the more prominent the disturbing element grew. She could not make any picture of to-morrow that satisfied her, or imagine a look on Margaret's face, when she told her story to her, that would not be a blight on her hopes. It seemed impossible that Stephen Pierrepoint should come to that house day after day, and that they two should have happy hours there, like other lovers, and a crowning day of their own at last, which should send them away to begin a new life together.

It was possible to imagine such things on the open hill-side, with Stephen walking beside her, but it was not possible indoors, in the old rooms, among the old dark heavy furniture that had impressed her with gloom and mystery ever since she could remember, and given to every room in the house a monotonous, unchangeable character of its own. How could such new things as lovers' hopes and confidences and joys come in there? Yet as these forebodings rose in Elsie's mind, she did not by any means prepare herself to relinquish her hold on the happiness she believed had come to her that day. It had been given to her—it was hers—and she felt a desperate defiant courage prompting her to cling to it, and not let any one snatch it away; such courage as people of strong feelings and weak wills clasp to their souls sometimes, fruitlessly enough for the most part, as it is almost sure to fail them when a calmer sort of resolution opposes it.

All her life she had so longed to be happy, to escape from the gloom and isolation of that terrible house. And now deliverance had come; this bright bird of joy had flown straight into her bosom; she would open

her arms to it and clasp it close, and defy cruel looks to kill it.

Margaret went to her room when her visitor left, and stayed there some time, and then she came to summon Elsie to tea.

Elsie looked up anxiously into her aunt's face to see if the unusual incident of her afternoon had left any trace of emotion on it. Margaret's was a countenance not easy to read; agitation of any kind, pleasurable or painful, had equally the effect of wakening it up and embellishing it. Elsie only discovered that her aunt looked younger and handsomer than usual to-night; there was a tinge of rose colour in each cheek, and her usually cold brown eyes were moist and glistening. As they descended the stairs together Elsie found courage to put a question she was longing to ask.

"I heard some one talking to you in the drawing-room, Aunt Margaret, when I came in this afternoon; some one whose voice I did not know. Who could it be?"

"It was an old friend of ours who has lately come to live near here—Gilbert Neale. Mr. Neale of Connington," said Margaret quietly.

"I have seen him, Aunt Margaret; did he tell you that I went with Miss Berry to Connington on the fête day?"

"Yes, he told me."

"Were you glad to see him?—will he ever come here again?" Elsie asked rather eagerly.

They had reached the drawing-room door by this time. Margaret opened it and entered without answering. Mr. Blake was there, and Elsie did not venture to persist in her questions before him.

The tea-hour passed as silently as it had always done since Mrs. Blake had been upstairs. Mr. Blake went away to take his turn of watching in the sick-room, and Elsie, left alone with Margaret, felt a nervous tremor come over her at the thought that now was the fittest time for the communication she had to make.

It was a relief when Margaret brought her writing-desk to the table and began to write. Elsie sat beside her unable to do anything, and feeling almost obliged to watch mechanically the motions of her fingers. For a while Margaret was occupied in transcribing a passage from a book, then she drew out a sheet of note paper and dated a letter. Elsie meant to turn her eyes away, and yet something impelled her to go on looking. The first letter of the name fascinated her attention; she could not help following the syllables as Margaret's fingers formed them. "My dear Mr. Stephen Pierrepoint," Margaret wrote, and then she paused, with the pen in her hand, and raising her head saw Elsie's dismayed gaze fixed on the paper.

"Elsie, my poor child," she said, turning towards her, with a gentler look on her face than had been there for years.

Trembling and shaking, Elsie sank on her knees by Margaret's chair.

"O Aunt Margaret! what are you going to do, what are you writing to him?" she said, in a voice that could not raise itself above a whisper. "O Margaret!"

Margaret pushed her desk away, threw her arms round Elsie's shaking figure, and bent a strangely softened face towards her.

"We will talk together before I write to him," she said, soothingly.

"No, no; why should we?" cried Elsie. "You and I! What can you have to say to him? Why should you interfere between him and me?"

"I hoped that what I had to write to Mr. Pierrepoint would not affect you, Elsie. I heard something to-day from your Uncle Gilbert Neale that makes it necessary I should give Stephen Pierrepoint a word of warning; but I trusted you were not implicated too. Let me know the whole truth now; it is best I should. What is he to you? He was a stranger a very short time ago, as it seems to me."

It would have been an embarrassing question even if Elsie had had a mother's shoulder to hide her face on while she answered; as it was, she forced herself to look up, and there was pitiful entreaty in her eyes as she said—

"He loves me, Aunt Margaret."

"And you?"

"Yes, I love him. Margaret, Margaret! don't look at me in that shocked way. I cannot bear it. What have I done? It is cruel to look so at me!"

Margaret turned away her sorrowful eyes from Elsie's face, and pressed her hand kindly on her head.

"I am not blaming you, poor child, only myself; myself, who must have been guilty of some neglect, some unfaithfulness to my trust, for this misfortune to have happened," she said in a voice that made Elsie shiver.

"How long has it been?" Margaret asked after a pause; "how long since he spoke to you?"

"I had a letter—one letter yesterday—and to-day I met him," faltered Elsie.

"One letter, one interview only," said Margaret in

a tone of relief; "I am glad it is no worse than that. He will get my note before he can have spoken of his hopes to any one; that will spare him some mortification, and prevent gossip and scandal. And since this idea has been in your minds so short a time, the disappointment of giving it up cannot be very great."

"It would kill me!" cried Elsie passionately.

Margaret smiled—a quiet, sad smile that roused Elsie to more vehement protestation than she had hitherto had courage for.

"Aunt Margaret, he shall not be disappointed! You may write and say what you like to him; it will make no difference. We have promised, and he will know that whatever you may say I shall not give him up. One promise is as good as a thousand, Aunt Margaret. You can never have loved in your life, or you would not say we can give each other up without pain because we have only promised just to-day. You never can have loved, Aunt Margaret!"

The faint colour Elsie had noticed in Margaret's cheek deepened to a rich glow, and her eyes grew large and clouded over, as if she were looking at something a long way off. "Elsie," she said, "I have seen to-day the man I loved for as many years as you have loved weeks, and who gave me up for a reason that affects you more nearly than it affected me. It was to save you from the same experience, the same bitter humiliation and pain, that I wished to write to Stephen Pierrepoint to-night. If you are wise and self-respecting, you will let me send my letter, and put an end to this hasty engagement on our side, without entering into explanations that can only cause terrible suffering to every one concerned in them."

"*He* would not give *me* up, Aunt Margaret," Elsie said confidently after a moment's thought. "Don't look so doubtfully at me; I don't mean that I am worth more than you, only that he is truer. You say I have only known him weeks instead of years, but I do know that about him. He loves me, and he would not give me up just for your writing to tell him that all was over, or for anything else you could say."

"Poor child!" Margaret said again.

"You need not pity me, Aunt Margaret," Elsie answered proudly; "you ought to envy me, for I can trust him. I will get up and leave you to write your note. I am not afraid. He will come here. I shall see him to-morrow, and I know he will deal fairly by me, and let me hear the truth and judge of it myself, whatever you can urge against me."

"I am not against you, Elsie," Margaret said sadly. "Some day, perhaps, you will know more and do me better justice. It is not my fault that there is so little confidence between us. There are circumstances affecting your life which I should have thought it right to acquaint you with long since. They are withheld from you at the request of one to whom you owe obedience. It is a great trial, but you will not lessen it by struggling against it. You shall see my note to Stephen Pierrepoint if you like. Since you will not consent to give up the engagement, I shall merely send a line to ask him to come here to-morrow afternoon. I must see him alone. When he has heard all that I have to say, he may speak to you if he pleases; but for your sake, I hope he will be persuaded to go away without exposing you to such useless agitation."

"I shall see him," Elsie said; "I have made up

my mind about that. I will not have all my chance of happiness talked away without my being able to help myself, or understand what has happened."

"I can only warn you," Margaret said solemnly, "and assure you, from my better knowledge, that you cannot help yourself, and may only give yourself a deeper wound than you have any thought of now. Will you look while I write my note to Mr. Pierrepoint?"

Elsie stood up, and Margaret resumed her pen; it was but a line or two, requesting him to call and see her at a certain hour in the afternoon of the next day, that she added to her commencement, and then she folded and sealed the note.

Elsie's eyes followed it wistfully as Margaret carried it out of the room. She would have liked to have had it in her hand for one moment, to have laid her cheek on the name written outside. She was actually more occupied with the thought that Stephen Pierrepoint would receive the note, that Margaret and not she herself had had the privilege of first sending written words to him, than with anxiety about the result of the appointed interview. He would come to the house to-morrow—he would certainly be there. He would talk to Margaret and overcome her objections. What was there he could not do? Elsie found she could not be very hopeless or let her thoughts go much beyond that.

Mrs. Blake awoke from her sleep that evening in much pain and discomfort; and Elsie and Margaret had to watch by her bedside a great part of the night. They sat side by side in the dim light of the night-lamp, holding whispered consultations at intervals

on the state of the invalid, busied together in many little offices for her comfort, and never approaching by a single word or look the subject that had agitated them both so much during the day.

Each hour that passed Elsie said to herself, "It is nearer to-morrow." She tried to think it was only the interval of suspense she had to dread; when that was over, all would be well. Meanwhile Margaret sat nerving herself for an effort which would make all the old long covered-up wounds in her heart bleed afresh. It must be done. Words she had hoped never to speak again must be spoken when to-morrow came.

The hours of the next day, till four o'clock, were even more tedious to Elsie than the night-watches had been. She had taken a resolution, but it was one of which her conscience did not altogether approve, and the doubt made her restless.

In Margaret's face there was always the same look of suffering. Elsie began to rebel against it in her heart. "It was cruel of Margaret to look so," she told herself; "for was it not her life, her love, that was at stake, not Margaret's? Margaret had no right to take disaster for granted, and chill her to the soul with such hopeless looks. She could not trust Margaret; she would hear and judge for herself."

She and her aunt were both in Mrs. Blake's room when it struck four. Elsie went to the window to look out. She was very nervous, but her absorbing fear was lest something should prevent Steenie from calling, and she should have to wait another day. When at last she saw him coming up the walk, she gave a start of joy. The window was open, she leaned

out; he chanced to look up in passing, their eyes met, and he smiled. Elsie drew back her head into the room, radiant, flushed, triumphant, defiant of Margaret and of fear, smiling at herself for having felt so miserable.

Margaret had been watching her, and understood the look. It told her that her torture hour had come. She rose deliberately, folded the work she was doing, and laid it away.

"You will not leave Grandmamma till I return," she said, looking back anxiously at Elsie as she left the room.

Elsie made no answer; she opened the door Margaret closed behind her, heard Stephen's steps and her aunt's crossing the hall to the library, and the library door closing behind them, and then she waited a minute or two irresolute. Her grandmother lay back tranquilly in her chair free from pain, but not noticing much anything that passed around her. Elsie stooped down quickly and kissed her cheek.

"If you knew, you would be on my side, darling," she said to herself, taking courage and a sort of sanction for what she was going to do from the thought. Then she went down-stairs, found Crawford in the kitchen, and sent her to sit with her mistress for half an hour.

There were two entrances to the library; one towards a passage opening into the garden, that was rarely used but in very hot weather, when it was desirable to let as much air as possible into the low-roomed old house. Elsie went in and out that way oftener than any one else; for the corner of the room on which the door opened was very dark, and cum-

bered with a great folding screen, used in winter to keep the draught from Mr. Blake's arm-chair, and less nimble feet than hers were apt to stumble there.

She opened the passage door softly now, pushed aside a fold of the screen, and stood inside the room a little in the shade, but visible to those within, if they chanced to turn their heads towards her.

Margaret was seated at the further end of the room by the window, and Stephen near her with the full light falling on his face. Elsie could almost have read the words on their lips, if her quick hearing had not enabled her to catch them. Stephen had just finished speaking when she entered. It rejoiced her heart to see how tranquil and confident he looked; there was even the beginning of a smile on his lips, as if he were half amused at something Margaret had said.

Margaret looked up to answer him. Her brow was knit with pain, and her hands, usually so quiet, were clasping and unclasping themselves nervously as they lay in her lap, but her voice never faltered; distinct and cold her clear tones sounded through the room.

"I am sorry," she said, "that you will not take my advice, and withdraw your request for my niece's hand on my solemn assurance that there are circumstances in our lives which, if you knew them, would alter your views, and which I cannot explain without pain to myself and risk to her peace of mind."

"You cannot judge of what circumstances would or would not deter me," said Stephen quickly. "I told you just now that I cannot imagine anything you can say making me think or feel differently towards

her from what I do now. So long as she remains what she is, and I have her promise, I will never voluntarily give her up. I am prepared for difficulties and objections, prepared to wait, prepared for anything but to resign the promise she made me yesterday at any one's request but her own."

How glad Elsie was she came in! How noble she thought Steenie looked as in the energy of speaking the last words he rose from his seat and stood up tall and resolute, looking down on Margaret!

There was silence for a few moments.

"You are forcing a painful task upon me," Margaret said at last. "Let me go through it with as little interruption as possible. You must listen to some particulars of our family history which we would gladly not have been obliged to communicate to any one here. I must trust to your honour to make them as little known as possible. We came here for the sake of the quiet and retirement of the place, and because we were unknown to every one. Blake was my mother's maiden name; my father's name is Le Fevre. My eldest brother, Herbert Le Fevre, is Elsie's father."

Elsie saw Steenie start, and change colour; all at once his face grew white and wild-looking, as if he had received a terrible blow. She could hardly help calling out aloud, but she pressed her lips tightly together, for Margaret was going on.

"You know the story that attaches to that name? I have said enough then. Mr. Neale told me you might have heard it."

"No, no," cried Steenie eagerly; "I have heard nothing that can concern you. There was a Le Fevre

—Mrs. Neale's guardian—of whose crimes I have heard, but it is so long ago: That man must be dead long ago."

"He is not dead," said Margaret. "I will tell you the story once for all, with such exculpation as there is for him. He was not always a bad-hearted man, and he had had responsibilities laid upon him for which he was not fitted. My father was asked by a friend of his, on his death-bed, to be guardian to his daughter. He had a great distaste for business himself, and persuaded his friend to join his son's name in the trust with his. Year by year my father fell more and more into the habit of confiding everything to my brother Herbert, in whose integrity and talents for business he had the greatest confidence. He was not altogether what we thought him, though the evil in his character was of slow growth. He had a beautiful gay wife, excessively fond of pleasure and show; they lived beyond their means, and to escape from difficulties that came upon them, he was tempted to speculate with his ward's money, and lost it. He succeeded in concealing the loss for a time, and went on, hoping to redeem it by fresh adventures; but one wrong led to another. Miss Connington, while she was still almost a child, made a runaway marriage with Walter Neale, my brother's brother-in-law. My father was angry, and refused to see either of them; and so we only heard rumours of the discontent and many disputes that arose between the supposed young heiress's husband and her guardian whenever questions of money had to be discussed between them.

"One of these disputes led to the quarrel, the miserable quarrel that ended so fatally for us all. It

was not a premeditated act. My brother had gone down to Thoresby, where the Neales lived, to settle some business with his ward. The day after his arrival he and Walter Neale went out apparently on quite friendly terms together. As they were returning home after a day's shooting, some of the old subjects of disagreement must have come up between them. Their voices were heard from a distance loud in dispute; but no one thought of interfering. I have always believed that Walter Neale struck a blow first; that it was not the provocation of words only which so maddened my brother as to induce him to fire the shot that killed his companion.

"Walter Neale was found dead in Thoresby woods that evening, and my brother escaped to France. He was soon traced, and brought back. Gilbert Neale, the brother of the unhappy man who had been killed, spared no pains to bring the offender to justice. It was proved on the trial that there had been great provocation, and that my brother's crime was not premeditated murder; but the misappropriation of the money told strongly against him, and he was sentenced to twenty-one years of penal servitude. He is bearing it yet,—he, and we, who, being linked with him must take our share of the suffering and shame that he has earned. Now you know the whole miserable story. It made a noise in the world once; it would rise up again and follow any one of us who should attempt to take an honourable place in society. Elsie has lived with us since she was a very little child. Her mother died in the first of the evil days, and she has been brought up in ignorance of her father's history. It has been his wish that it should be so. The one

gleam of light in his miserable existence has been the hope of one day meeting his innocent child, and seeing no shame or sorrow for him on her face. I have always feared that such a blessing could not possibly come to him, and yet—I—we have all struggled for it, as the one chance of redemption left for him. Do not come between us, and that single prospect of a measure of good in the future. I do not ask you to conceal what I have told you from your father and friends if you think it right to tell them; but keep it from her. Have the courage to go away from Oldbury without seeing her again. You cannot save her from her lot. It is not to be expected of you that you should be willing to share it; but I do require you to leave her at once, without harrowing her feelings with farther interviews, or raising false hopes by promises made in an excitement of feeling now, which you would be certain to repent of hereafter. I am not good at asking favours of any one; but I do implore this of you."

Margaret rose as she finished speaking, came close to Stephen, and laid her hand on his arm. Her grave voice had hardly faltered once during her narrative, but her lips had grown whiter and whiter as they resolutely formed the words, and now it was a haggard death-like face, with energy and life in the imploring eyes only, that confronted Stephen.

He had turned away while she spoke, and was leaning against the window-frame, his face partly hidden on his arm. He did not immediately look up to answer Margaret; but Elsie could see by the agitation of his whole frame that a severe struggle was

going on in his mind. She had gradually come forward almost into the middle of the room. The first sentences of Margaret's story struck her to the heart like the repeated strokes of a knife; she had instinctively put up her hands to defend herself from them, and then her pulses seemed to stop beating. The succeeding words that fell from Margaret's lips buzzed in her ears, darkened her eyes like actual palpable things, but they conveyed no impression to her mind. Her eyes were fixed steadfastly on Steenie's face, watching the changes there; only there she felt capable of reading her destiny, of understanding the meaning of what had come upon her. When he turned away from Margaret to the window, and shaded his face, a new agony struck through her. She made a step or two forward into the room, which seemed to grow dark round her, and strained her eyes to see still. At last he moved his hand from his forehead, and prepared to speak. It would be a sentence of life or death that came from his lips, Elsie felt. The first words, lowly spoken, failed to reach her ears; she was losing the power of listening and looking; the darkness came close to her; she threw out her arms to save herself with a cry of fear, and fell forward in a swoon on the floor.

She fancied afterwards that she had a confused recollection of being raised up in strong arms and carried to the window, and of hearing voices murmuring round her at intervals for a long time; but a crushingly heavy weight lay on her limbs and pressed down her eyelids, and forbade her to stir or look up. She seemed to herself to be lying dead, listening to echoes of sounds, and feeling transmitted touches

from a distant invisible world, into which she had no power to bring herself back.

A long time afterwards, when a current of cold air blowing on her face brought a sense of revival, she opened her eyes wearily, and saw Margaret's anxious face bending over her. She was lying on the floor by the study window open to the ground, and a lamp on a table near cast a faint light over the room. She dragged herself up into a half-sitting position and looked round.

"He has gone," she said; "he has left me; there is no one here but you."

"Yes, we are alone together, dearest. Are you better?" Margaret answered soothingly; but Elsie let herself slide down on to the floor again and shut her eyes.

"Elsie," Margaret said, bending over her, "I sent him away. He did not want to go, but I made him leave us when I saw you were coming to yourself. It was my duty. Dearest, we could not let him stay, you and I, and permit him to speak words, and bind himself by promises, in the excitement of such an hour as this, which he might regret all his life after. We are very unhappy, all of us, but you and I, dear, will never drag down any one we love to share our pain. We can make that resolution at least, and there is peace and self-respect in it."

Margaret's words had a bracing strength in them, like the chill evening air, but Elsie was not in a state to bear them just then. They only made her shiver and moan, and turn her head more resolutely away. She would not let Margaret raise her from the ground; it seemed the most friendly place to her just then. If

only it would open, and take her down a little lower still, and cover her up from the sight of everything that her eyes had hitherto rested on!

Some one came and called Margaret away; but Elsie lay still where she was, till the moon rose and looked cold on her face, and passed away, and the stars came and blinked at her. She was not thinking. The conversation she had overheard had hardly brought any distinct facts to her mind, or at all events she could not remember them now. She had only a vague horror wandering up and down in her mind, which rose up and thrust the thought of Steenie from her when she tried to recall his face, and blotted out for ever the dreams of father and mother that had made part of her life till now.

The most distinct impression she had was a dread of having to get up at last, and mount the stairs she had run down an hour or two ago, and stand in the window where she had been when Steenie smiled up at her, and be forced to see the places and speak to the people she had last looked upon and spoken to, when there was hope in her heart.

CHAPTER VI.

Oldbury aghast.

MR. PIERREPOINT was too anxious and unhappy to conceal from Cecil what had passed between him and Stephen during their conversation on the evening after Mrs. Lutridge's visit. Cecil's anxiety made her a little inquisitive, and Mr. Pierrepoint was not the sort of person to deny himself the comfort of her sympathy and the relief of discussing probabilities with her whenever they were alone together.

He did not at first intend to confide so far in her, but one revelation led to another; and on the morning of the second day after Stephen's departure, while they were pacing up and down the elm-tree walk together, watching for the postman to come up the street, the whole sad history which Margaret had revealed to Stephen was told.

Cecil heard it almost in silence. Perhaps the sharpest pang she felt was the prick of remorse that came when she remembered how she had paced that garden walk, a day or two ago, picturing the happiness of these two, between whom such a thunderbolt had fallen, and allowed thoughts of self to spoil her pleasure in it. How could she be so selfish? Oh, if only the prospect she had then thought a little gloomy would come back now and look probable, or even possible, how thankful she would be!

Mr. Pierrepoint had finished his narration of the facts of the story by the time Cecil's thoughts had reached this point, and he proceeded to expatiate earnestly, almost angrily, on his certainty that Stephen could not possibly, in the face of such circumstances, persist in his desire to engage himself to Elsie Blake. It could not be thought of. He did not wish to quarrel with his son, but to sanction such a connexion was a sheer impossibility, which, in sane moments, Stephen himself would not contemplate. He almost implored Cecil to assure him that she was as sanguine as to Stephen's reasonableness as he professed to be himself. When he paused for a comfortable answer, Cecil roused herself to speak with some difficulty.

"How could Steenie go away?" she said, in a tone that jarred on Mr. Pierrepoint's feelings. "How could he leave her? I can't understand it."

"My dear, I wonder you don't see that it was the only wise, the only honourable thing to be done, though I don't quite give him the credit of it. The elder Miss Blake seems to be a very right thinking person, and to have behaved very well. She has forbidden him to come to the house, or to write to her niece for the present. She told him she was extremely anxious that no rash promises should be made, which could only lead to repentance and disappointment afterward. I have always believed her to be a very upright, proud person, and I can imagine she would be very unwilling to allow her niece to enter a family where her presence would be felt to be a disgrace. She would prefer any other lot, however humble or lonely, to that. It was, doubtless, a feeling of this

kind which prevented her forming any marriage connexion herself."

"Of course it was," said Cecil; "I understand her. But Elsie, our poor Elsie, she is not proud or strong-minded. Loneliness and neglect will not be tolerable to her. Oh, why should she have to bear them? Why must she be punished for other people's sins?"

"It is inevitable," Mr. Pierrepoint said, "and right too. 'The sins of the fathers,' you know——"

"Oh, uncle, don't!" cried Cecil, the tears starting into her eyes. "That is just one of those things that go down into one's heart like a knife. I know it is true and just as it is meant there, only when it is applied in a case like this it does seem so terrible."

"There are many terrible things in the world one has to face," answered Mr. Pierrepoint; "and no good ever comes of shutting one's eyes to them. Your father is a man of experience, and will, you will find, take the same view that I do."

"But did Steenie *promise* to be guided by Papa? That is another thing I can't understand. Such a question as this, I should have thought, a man must decide for himself. It will be very unlike Steenie to let Papa decide for him."

"He did not promise, but I reckon very much on your father's influence over him. In fact it rests with your father, for without my consent and assistance, Steenie cannot possibly marry for years to come; and I have engaged to abide by your father's decision, whatever it is."

"But even if they can't marry for years to come, they might be engaged and wait. Steenie is sure to get on eventually, either at the bar, or in some career

that will open out for him if he goes abroad with Papa. That is what I expect they will decide to do," Cecil said, a little maliciously.

"It would be a miserable mistake," groaned Mr. Pierrepoint. "Do you wish Steenie to cut himself off from all his friends and ruin his prospects for life? Would you have him take his father-in-law to live with him when he comes out of prison; and am I expected to open the Rectory to them, and let them come here? I wonder that you can think calmly of such a prospect."

Cecil did not make any direct answer to this appeal. "If only my father had seen her," she said musingly, after a pause. "He won't be able even to imagine what she really is. I wish I were in London just now."

"You are taking this in a very different spirit from what I expected," Mr. Pierrepoint said reproachfully. "I thought you had your cousin's interest really at heart. Cecil, take care you are not carried away by girlish interest in a love story to act a part you may repent all your life. What will your feelings be hereafter if you use the influence you have to confirm Stephen in a course of conduct that will make a lasting breach between him and me? You can't think it right that he should set my wishes at nought in so serious a matter as this."

"No, no; of course not," cried Cecil eagerly. "I am only wishing it were possible that Papa should give his opinion in favour of an engagement being allowed; and then you know you have promised to reconcile yourself to it. Was that a drop of rain? Oh dear, I am afraid there is a storm coming on, and I

want to go up the hill as soon as the letters have come, to try if I can see Elsie Blake."

"I beg you will do no such thing. I really must request very particularly that there may be no communication whatever between this house and the house on the hill while you remain here."

Cecil was going to remonstrate hotly, when the sharp sound of the postman's knock sent her flying through the house to take the letters from the servant in the hall.

She came back with one only in her hand. "For me, not you," she said to Mr. Pierrepoint, who met her half-way. "Yes, it is from Papa, but there will be nothing particular in it, for he will never suppose I know."

"Read it at all events," said Mr. Pierrepoint breathlessly.

Cecil tore the envelope open and glanced quickly down the pages. At one point her countenance fell, and she uttered a little sound of vexation.

"Well?" asked Mr. Pierrepoint.

"Oh, nothing," answered Cecil, colouring deeply; then looking up and observing an expression of anxious curiosity on her uncle's face, she made a great effort and added, "But I daresay you would like to read the last half page; begin here." She held the letter towards her uncle and re-perused the lines with him, till some tears starting to her eyes made her father's words illegible.

"I begin to wish I had let you come up to London a week or two ago," the letter ran. "I know how warm my Cecil's heart is, and how she throws herself

headlong into her friends' concerns, making herself sometimes a little more busy in them than is quite wise or well for her own peace. I am afraid she is placed in rather trying circumstances just now, which call for more circumspection than I can credit her with. Seriously, my darling, I am uneasy about you, and I wish with all my heart I had not let you spend this long summer in Oldbury. I don't like to think of your having been made the confidant in a love affair which is likely to have a very painful termination. Not knowing how far you are involved, I cannot give you all the advice I should like to give. I only venture to say, be cautious, or rather be obedient. You are under your uncle's roof; don't say or do anything of which you think he would disapprove; and remember that this is too serious a matter for unauthorized meddling." There was a postscript scribbled in a corner, which Cecil had overlooked at first. "I open my letter to say that on second thoughts I had rather you came home to me as soon as possible. I know Grandmamma does not like to be hurried into a journey, so I shall not expect to see you till the end of the week. We must soon plunge into the business of preparations for our voyage to China, and you will have more than enough to do and think of. Steenie will write to his father to-morrow, and so shall I. We are having a great deal of talk about the secretaryship and other things. When we have come to any conclusion, we will write."

Mr. Pierrepoint was surprised to see a round blot fall on the paper as he finished reading, and looking up he spied another on its way down Cecil's cheek.

"My dear," he said, "I thought you would be glad

of a summons to London. You wished you were there a few minutes ago."

Cecil dashed the moisture from her eyes. Of course it was not to be expected that any one should understand what great pain the least shade of blame from her father gave her, or how deeply she was troubled by the prospect of a difference of opinion arising between herself and him.

"Grandmamma will take a week to make up her mind about going," she said. "It will be too late for me to do any good when I get there."

"I don't know what you mean by doing any good," Mr. Pierrepoint observed stiffly. "You always profess to have unbounded confidence in your father's goodness and wisdom, I should have thought you would not have presumed to seek to influence his judgment in any way."

"I am not to have the chance; I am ordered to do nothing," she said a little huskily, as she drew the letter from her uncle's hands and crushed it down with an impatient gesture to the bottom of her pocket. She had never served any letter of her father's so before.

Mr. Pierrepoint passed on to his study, relieved of one-half of his load of apprehension, and Cecil flew upstairs to her grandmother's room to impart the news of their summons to London, and attempt to argue her into an admission that she could possibly encounter a three-hours' railway journey without having had an entire week to think about it before-hand.

A lengthened discussion of this question with Lady Selina did not tend to calm Cecil's temper or raise her spirits; and when, a few hours later, she

rushed across the road through a storm of rain to call on Miss Berry; she was so unlike her usual bright self that that lady could not refrain from exclaiming about her dejected looks the instant she entered the room.

Cecil felt disgusted with herself for her want of command of countenance, when, after mysteriously closing the door behind her, Miss Berry looked up into her face and began—

"Ah, my dear, I see it is all true! You have heard the terrible news about the Blakes as well as I. I thought I read it in your face as you were crossing the street, and now I am sure."

"What terrible news?" said Cecil. "Let me take off my wet cloak and hat, dear Elderberry, and pray, pray don't look so doleful. You know I always tell you *never* to believe half or a quarter of what you hear in Oldbury."

"But, my dear, I am afraid you do believe this report about the Blakes. Oh, I have had such a dreadful afternoon! When I saw Miss Tomkinson coming up the street through the heaviest of the thundershower, my heart misgave me; for you know people don't come out in such a storm—at least not in Oldbury—unless they have a great deal of very bad news to tell. I thought of all the accidents that might possibly have happened. Whether it was the powder-mills on the other side of the river that had been blown up and everybody killed; or good Mrs. Adams taken in an apoplectic fit; but nothing half so terrible as what I did hear came into my head. I don't think I have ever been quite so miserable in my life. Apart from my affection for the parties concerned, there is

the sense of responsibility. I shall feel all my life, and I am sure Mrs. Lutridge will always say, that it has been almost all my fault. I am afraid in my agitation that I said more about that part of the subject to Miss Tomkinson than was quite prudent."

"About what part?" asked Cecil, fairly puzzled.

"About all that went on in this room a few weeks ago, which did not strike me so much at the time, because of my having you, my dear, so thoroughly fixed in my head for Stephen Pierrepoint. Now I will confess something to you that troubles me a good deal—something I said myself. They were standing, your cousin Stephen and Elsie Blake, on the opposite side of the table there, talking together one evening, as I am sorry to say they were very much in the habit of doing, and I had just finished knitting a pair of socks, and was measuring the two together to see how they matched, and I said aloud, 'To be sure, what a handsome well-fitted pair, they were,' and your cousin looked up at me in the comical way he has, and said, 'Thank you, Elderberry; you really think so, do you?' My dear, do you know I believe now that he meant, not the socks, but himself and Elsie, and it does give me such a pang to-day to think it was, perhaps, that foolish speech of mine that put the whole thing into his head."

"Miss Tomkinson has been talking scandal about my cousin and Elsie Blake, then?" said Cecil. "She is the most arrant gossip in Oldbury. You may be sure she says a great deal more than she knows to be true."

"If I could but think so; but it was not so much about the young people she talked, though of course

it is their engagement that makes the other revelation so terrible. It is this dreadful discovery that has come out about the Blakes she has been confiding to me. I can hardly put it into words; but it seems that we have been deceived in them all along. They are not Blakes at all; they have another name, of which they have reason to be ashamed. Mr. and Mrs. Blake have a son still living of whom we have never heard; he is Elsie's father, and Miss Tomkinson says he is actually in prison now, convicted of a crime—Miss Tomkinson says parricide; but I have been thankfully reflecting, since she left, it can't be quite that, for old Mr. Blake is certainly alive. Still, I am afraid it may be something nearly as bad, for Mrs. Lutridge has had several attacks of palpitation, and says that if murderers' families are to be allowed to flock to Oldbury there will be no knowing when we are safe."

"Where did all this cruel gossip spring from?" said Cecil in despair. "I hope, dear Miss Berry, you will do all you can to prevent its spreading in the town. True or untrue, think how cruel it is towards the Blakes for their neighbours to be circulating tales against them while poor old Mrs. Blake is dying. What business is it of anybody's in Oldbury?"

"My dear, the Blakes have been living in Oldbury sixteen years, and we see them every Sunday at church. It is not to be expected that we should not talk about them. It seems that Mrs. Lutridge has long had suspicions, and that they have been confirmed in an extraordinary manner through the instrumentality of Dr. Tomkinson, who is now staying in the town. He was called in to visit Mrs. Blake, and he recognised her and Miss Blake. He is doctor in one of the convict

prisons, and he has actually seen them there—Mrs. Blake and Margaret in prison—with his own eyes! Oh, dear! Miss Tomkinson thought it her duty to acquaint Mrs. Lutridge with the circumstance at once, and yesterday, after having inquired and learned further particulars, she called on the Bodleys, and on several other families, and, my dear, I am afraid there is no use in hoping that the Oldbury people can be kept from talking about it, though every one seems to agree that no one but Mrs. Lutridge should venture to speak on the subject to poor Mr. Pierrepoint. It is terrible for him. His son engaged to a murderer's daughter! It is enough to break his heart, and all our hearts; and when I think that it was at my house it all happened —I don't, of course, mean the murder, but the engagement—I do feel as if I should never be able to hold up my head again."

"You think only of yourself and of my uncle; you do not seem nearly as sorry for Elsie Blake as I should have expected. I think you are very unfeeling, Elderberry," cried Cecil, who was by this time worried into an aggressive state of temper that made it a relief to find fault with some one.

This startling accusation drove Miss Berry to a fresh flood of tears; and when Cecil, repentant, attempted to console her, she, too, broke down utterly, and gave way to such a despairing fit of weeping that Miss Berry became thoroughly alarmed on her account.

"Let me go!" Cecil said, when by a great effort she had succeeded in calming herself. "No, I don't want any sal-volatile or anything! I am not ill, I am only silly. Please understand that I am thoroughly ashamed of myself for going on like this, and that you

are not to think anything of it, or draw conclusions. I will come again to-morrow and behave better. You see it has done raining, and nothing will really do me good now but the air."

The wet streets were very still and empty when Cecil came out into them, and instead of turning in at the Rectory gates she walked on at a brisk pace down the lower part of the town out on to the road, till she came to the bridge over the Idle. There was nobody on it this afternoon. It was such a relief to her to be out of the house, and to feel the wind blowing freshly on her face, that she could not help lingering. She leant on the parapet of the bridge and looked down into the dark turbid water.

It had ceased raining, but heavy storm-clouds were rising from the west, and spreading themselves over the sky. Fitful gusts of wind came every now and then, and raved in the tree-tops, and tossed withering leaves and dead branches down into the river. The gloom suited Cecil's state of mind very well that afternoon. She let her thoughts glance back all through the weeks and days of the bright summer. What a time it had been! and now it was over, and everything was changed. The wind seemed to take the last word from her lips and moan it out over the whole country round; the trees tossed their arms in despair when it was brought to them; and the river made a long endless sigh of it as it rippled away under her feet.

She was almost frightened at the pain in her own heart. Yes, it was true what her father said. She had been unconsciously mixing herself up too intimately in the lives of those two, whose hearts after all were each other's and not hers; and now the blow that

struck them wounded her more deeply than any one would be able to understand. She hardly dared ask herself why she was so very very unhappy, why life looked so different to her now from what it had done when she used to cross that bridge in gay talk with her cousin, on soft bright mornings and evenings in the early summer-time. It would be a never-to-be-forgotten summer to her; it left her very different from what it found her. Oh, how was it that she had allowed this deep disturbance to invade her soul?

It had not all come with the knowledge of her cousin's and Elsie's trouble. She remembered that she had not been able to rejoice in their happiness as she had intended to do, and that thought gave her quite an unreasonably strong pang of remorse now. She covered her eyes with her hands for a minute or two—there was no one to see her—and breathed a silent fervent prayer in her heart that she might be permitted to do something for her two friends; to work generously for them, and help them to be faithful to each other, and that she might live to see them crowned with happiness in the end, without one thought of self coming in then to cloud her joy in their prosperity. She felt a great deal calmer and braver when she turned to walk home again, and managed to meet her uncle at dinner-time with a tolerably cheerful countenance.

CHAPTER VII.

Mrs. Lutridge acts for the best.

When the next morning came, Mr. Pierrepoint rather repented having made a confidant of Cecil, for her extreme anxiety induced a vigilance on her part that was rather embarrassing to him. If she had been sympathising fully with his wishes, it would have been all very well; they could have watched the post, and wished the early hours of the day away together in comfort. As it was, it irritated him to know that she was on the alert to hear everything that came to his knowledge, and to feel that, having already spoken so openly to her, he could hardly refuse to gratify the curiosity he had roused.

He heard with some impatience the drawing-room door open softly, just as he was opening the door of the library that he might catch the first sound of the postman's steps approaching; and when the expected knock came, he found it would be most dignified to stand still within the library doorway, so little chance was there of his being beforehand with the light figure that flew down the stairs and laid hands on the letters before the postman had finished slipping them into the box.

"I know I ought not to have done it," Cecil said apologetically, as she handed him his letters in at the door; "but I thought there might be a little line for

me from Papa or Steenie, and I was in such a hurry to get it. They are all for you to-day."

Mr. Pierrepoint's habitual graciousness failed him just then. He took the letters in silence, and closed the study door in Cecil's face.

She was too unhappy to be angry. She walked up and down the hall, and sat on the stairs watching the study, in the hope that her uncle would come out and speak to her, or at all events that she should read on his face the character of the news he had received. What a long time he was studying the two thick letters she had handed him in! Cecil roamed about the house twisting and wringing her small hands with impatience. It was raining heavily again, soft, persistent, melancholy rain, and she could not refresh herself by running out into the garden. She wandered into the breakfast-room at last, and looked mechanically out of the window. Presently a tall, imposing figure, cloaked, clogged, and umbrellaed, appeared in the distance of the empty wet street. No mistaking Mrs. Lutridge, or hoping that it was not the Rectory she was bearing down upon. Cecil took her resolution at once.

She walked straight to the library, entered without knocking, and closed the door behind her. Mr. Pierrepoint was seated at his desk, his head resting dejectedly on his hand, and several sheets of paper spread out before him. Cecil went up and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Please don't be angry with me, Uncle," she said: "I have not any right to ask; but won't you tell me what they say—what my father says at least?"

"Your father says just what I should have expected him to say," Mr. Pierrepoint answered, rather sharply;

"what any man of sense and experience must say. He knows the history of the Le Fevre family very well. He remembers the trial of this girl's father, and the great public indignation roused against him at the time by the disclosures that came out. He considers that I have every right to refuse my consent to my son's marrying the daughter of such a man—that I ought indeed to set my face against it; since Steenie is too young, and, at present, not in a state of mind to judge what is for his real good. If I can prevent it, he must not be allowed to sacrifice himself."

Cecil's eyes had become fixed, while her uncle was speaking, on an unopened letter, directed in Stephen's handwriting, which lay on the desk, and she hardly heard the last sentence.

"Oh!" she could not help exclaiming, "there is a letter! Steenie has written to her."

"Yes," said Mr. Pierrepoint discontentedly, "it seems that her aunt has entreated him not to attempt any communication with her as long as my consent to their engagement is withheld, and he actually wants me to take this letter to her myself, to secure her being allowed to receive and answer it."

"Then he does not mean quite to give her up?" said Cecil eagerly.

"What he means just now will prove of very little consequence in the end. He cannot marry her at present, and it appears that her friends have sufficient principle not to allow her to enter into an engagement unsanctioned by me. Whatever promises for the future he may have made in that letter had much better have been left unwritten. Yes, you may read what he says to me if you like; he does not write in an undutiful

spirit, but it is an extremely distressing and perplexing letter to me."

Cecil took the closely-written sheets from her uncle's hand, and read rapidly, for her ears told her that the threatened interruption was imminent now. As she devoured the pages her heart beat faster and faster, and tears kept rushing up and inconveniently blinding her eyes. She liked the letter, every word. It was just what she would have expected Steenie to write, from her inmost knowledge of him, and yet it moved her strangely, as earnest words will when they come from a person who usually shows the lighter part of his character only.

In her breathless haste, it was rather the sense than the words she gathered. Stephen did not make light of the objections to his engagement which his father felt so strongly. He even said that if he had known all he now knew at the beginning of his attachment to Elsie, or even before he had spoken to her, he should have felt it his duty to keep out of her way. It might possibly have been better for him if he had known earlier. He would not say that it was not a great misfortune to have given his heart to one whose life was shadowed with so terrible a calamity. But he had done it, and now he could only abide by the consequences of his own act. She was not guilty, though the consequences of guilt rested on her, and he loved her well enough to wish to bear them with her. He did not expect his father to feel with him, or to give him credit for as much resolution and constancy as the course he had determined on called for. He did not venture to ask him to sanction either a marriage or an engagement between them at present, and he

knew that Elsie's friends would not permit her to pledge herself to him without such sanction; but he had written to tell her that he should consider himself bound to her as long as she was free, and that she might trust him to claim her again as soon as he was in a position to marry, if her feelings towards him did not change in the meantime. He had also, he said, offered to remain in England, instead of going abroad, if she wished it. Having written this, and meaning to abide by her decision on that point, he thought it right that his father should know what he had done; and he believed that he would not blame him when he came to think it over, however strong his first disapproval might be. There was more that Cecil could only glance at. Something about Margaret Blake's honourable scruples, and his fears lest she should prevent Elsie from writing her wishes freely to him if his letter came to her in any other way than through his father's hands; and then came a very earnest appeal to his father to be kind to Elsie, and to spare Margaret's pride as much as he could if he were admitted to an interview with them, when he called to deliver the letter.

A peremptory tap at the study door came before Cecil's eyes had quite travelled down to the end of the last page. She laid her hand on the door to keep it shut while she restored the sheets to their envelope and laid the letter within Mr. Pierrepoint's writing-desk. She could not bear the thought of Mrs. Lutridge's eyes resting on it.

"Uncle, I think he is right," she said. "I call it a noble letter. You will let Elsie have hers? You will do what he asks?"

"He is very inconsiderate towards me," Mr. Pierrepoint said. "It is putting me in a most painful position. I had much rather not be brought into personal communication with these people, and my seeing them just now will occasion a great deal of gossip and misconception in the town."

There was an expression in Cecil's eyes, still fixed on his face, that Mr. Pierrepoint did not at all like. A flash of indignation showing through their tears: "How can you think so much of how it affects yourself?" the eyes said.

Mr. Pierrepoint was not accustomed to have his self-regardful speeches received in that fashion; to most of his friends, it was an acknowledged fact that there was nothing in the world of so much consequence as the maintenance of his influence in Oldbury. Cecil's reproachful look touched him, but only enough to make him cross.

"I think," he observed, "that you had better stand out of the way, and allow the person who has been waiting some time at the door to come in. I really have not any more time to give up to you this morning. There are other things besides our own private concerns to be attended to."

Cecil escaped the minute the door was opened to admit Mrs. Lutridge, and that lady burst in, too full of what she had to say to notice Miss Russel's hasty departure.

The sympathy expressed in Mrs. Lutridge's face was not altogether ungrateful to Mr. Pierrepoint, irritated as he was by Cecil's unexpected opposition. She came in holding out both hands for Mr. Pierrepoint to shake.

"Dear friend," she began, "you see what a day it is, but I could not allow the rain to keep me away from you an hour longer. How my heart has been bleeding for you and for our dear Stephen during the last two days! All over the town there is nothing talked of but this dreadful disclosure about the Blakes, and the misery which your son's unfortunate attachment to that poor girl must occasion you. Confirmation of Dr. Tomkinson's story appears to rise up on every side, and the whole place is in a most painful state of agitation. How does Stephen bear it?"

"He is away in London at present," said Mr. Pierrepoint; "let us put him out of the question altogether. Cannot you do anything to stop the reports you speak of? True or untrue, it is great cruelty to the Blakes that such rumours should be spread abroad just now, when they have already sufficient trouble upon them."

"My dear friend, I feel for the Blakes as deeply as you do, but when I consider the peril to which our dear families have been exposed, I cannot but rejoice that we have been undeceived in time. I shudder to think what might have happened. I have had fears —I don't mind confessing it to you now—serious fears, on my dear Richard's account; and in looking back I remember a period when you yourself were drawn into a degree of intimacy, which might have led—perhaps I am going too far in asking you to imagine what the result at that time might possibly have been."

Mr. Pierrepoint made a hasty movement in his chair and muttered some incoherent negatives, which Mrs. Lutridge interpreted into a refusal even to imagine the result she hinted at; and warned from this old

subject of speculation, she reverted to the state of public opinion in Oldbury respecting the Blakes, upon which she had called to deliberate.

Mr. Pierrepoint interrupted her now and then to put in a word or two of excuse for the conduct of the Blake family in concealing their antecedents from their Oldbury neighbours, or to recall to her recollection the various attempts to induce them to take part in the society of the place, which they had strenuously resisted when they first came to the town. Yet even while he was defending them from unjust blame, his vexation and dismay grew stronger and stronger. It was an intense annoyance to him to hear his son's name mixed up in the flood of exaggerated talk and gossip which Mrs. Lutridge poured into his ear. He glanced at the letter on his desk, and disliked the thought of the task Steenie had imposed on him more than ever. At last Mrs. Lutridge rose to go; and just as she was shaking hands, her eyes fell on the letter addressed to Miss Elsie Blake, in Stephen's handwriting, which lay on the desk. Her eyebrows and eyelids elevated themselves to their utmost capacity.

"Oh!" she exclaimed (for there was no impertinence to which intense curiosity, mingled with spite, could not tempt her). "So he does correspond with the young lady! I am sorry for that. I was in hopes, from what you said, that things had not gone quite so far. I do feel for you, it is a most disastrous business indeed."

"No, no; there is no correspondence," said Mr. Pierrepoint hastily, "and I hope you will contradict any gossip of that kind you may hear as decidedly as possible. I do not deny there has been a certain de-

gree of attachment, such as will arise when young people are thrown together; but I must do Miss Blake the justice to say that she is far too upright a person to sanction anything between her niece and my son of which I disapprove. Stephen is most probably going abroad with his uncle shortly, and this is a farewell letter which he has requested me to convey."

"Indeed! and you will actually see her? What a painful task for you, my dear friend; and how liable to be misconstrued. Do you think that you are the best person to do it? Is it not exposing yourself to unnecessary agitation and persuasion? Could I not spare you the painful scene by undertaking the delivery of this letter myself? I shall pass the house on my way home, and I was thinking of calling and insisting on an interview with some member of the family, that I might give them a friendly word of warning about what is now being said against them in the town, and counsel them as to what their conduct ought to be in the present painful crisis of their affairs. I should have no objection to see the young lady too; I would make a point of it. I would speak to her just as I should do if my own precious only son's interests were concerned—affectionately and faithfully, as I hardly think it would be possible for you to speak. Shall it not be as I say?"

Mr. Pierrepoint did not answer immediately, and Mrs. Lutridge stretched her hand over his shoulder, and lifted the letter from the desk.

"Yes," she said, "you feel with me that this is best, and I need not say how thankful I am of an opportunity of sparing you. It will not be the first time that

I have taken on myself to act as a mother might do in what concerns our dear Stephen."

Mr. Pierrepoint stood irresolute, with his eyes fixed on the letter, silently watching it on its way to the leather reticule, already stuffed with papers, in which Mrs. Lutridge was prepared to engulf it. Just as the steel mouth opened to snap it up, he put out his hand to stop it. Mrs. Lutridge dropped the letter in, and brought the steel lips together with a sounding snap.

"Yes, my acting for you in this matter will save a great deal of publicity and scandal. You would probably not have been received the first time you called —you would have had to make repeated visits; and it is not as if you were in the habit of going to the house. It is years since you have been within their doors. They have actually sent for the clergyman of the district church to administer the Sacrament to Mrs. Blake since she has been ill. What stronger proof of a guilty conscience towards you could they have given?"

"No, no, not that; their conduct towards me is entirely blameless," said Mr. Pierrepoint quickly. "But it is true enough that circumstances have occurred which may well make Miss Blake prefer to receive this communication from you rather than from me. I may trust you to make her understand that the letter is sent with my knowledge and consent, and to let her know that I do not blame her or her niece in the smallest degree for anything that has passed."

"You may depend on me to act with true kindness and discretion. I am not one of those selfish people who, from a cowardly fear of taking responsibility on themselves, refrain from acting in their neigh-

bours' concerns when they can be of service. I wonder what state Oldbury would be in if I were?"

Mr. Pierrepoint did not seem disposed to enter into that question just then. He shook hands almost in silence, and in another moment Mrs. Lutridge found herself outside the house, with her umbrella and her cloak and the soaking rain. She did not immediately turn her face homewards; the rain did not daunt her. She preferred a very rainy day for calling on her friends. She liked coming into their houses with damp face and hair, and dispersing the drippings of her cloak and umbrella over their sanded floors or neat carpets. It carried an impression of self-devotion to their minds, which must, Mrs. Lutridge considered, greatly add to the edification of her visits.

She was far too wet and uncomfortable looking to-day to think of going home quietly; and there were the Miss Tomkinsons at the other end of the town, who would be quite as grateful to her for coming to them through the rain, and giving them the earliest information of her interview with Mr. Pierrepoint, as her self-love demanded.

Perhaps she might even tell them about Stephen's letter, and edify them with a foretaste of the advice she meant to season it with when she gave it to Elsie; shrinking, timid, dove-eyed Elsie, whom it would no doubt be well to warn against attempting fresh conquests, now that her first prize was slipping away from her. Mrs. Lutridge thought out some very judicious and vigorous sentences as she trudged resolutely along.

There was a narrow little street running by the river-side, the opening of which had to be passed be-

fore you came to the bridge, beyond which the Tomkinsons' house was situated. Some of the poorest people in Oldbury lived there, and among the wretchedest of their houses Margaret Blake might be sometimes seen coming in and out. They were the only houses she had ever entered in Oldbury but her own. She chanced to be just returning from one of these visits of mercy when Mrs. Lutridge reached the corner of the street. That vigilant lady's eye fell upon her while she was still distant some paces, and scanned her curiously as she approached. The hood of her grey cloak was drawn over her bonnet, and the struggle with the wind and rain had given a temporary animation and colour to her face, which brought back to it, for the moment, a good deal of the peculiar proud beauty of which Mrs. Lutridge had hated the sight when it had first startled Oldbury, and been a topic of remark to everybody. What a firm light step she had! She was holding her head higher than usual, as if some proud or defiant thought was in her mind. Mrs. Lutridge looked at her with amazement. Was this the way in which she, who was creating so much disturbance in the place, bore the disaffection of all her neighbours? Such an unbecoming spirit deserved to be taken down and humbled.

Margaret had in fact undergone a great deal of agitation that morning. In the course of her visits she had become aware of the suspicion and ill-will that was being excited in the town against herself and her family, and Mrs. Lutridge's name had been mentioned to her as the author of reports which she feared would sooner or later drive them away from Oldbury.

Her heart was very full of indignation against the person who had wantonly brought this new calamity upon them, and she was in no mood for amicable conversation when she perceived that Mrs. Lutridge was lingering for the purpose of intercepting her at the corner of the road.

She attempted to slip past with a haughty bend of the head, but Mrs. Lutridge stood full in the path and laid a hand on her arm.

"Miss Blake, excuse my stopping you, but I have a question of importance to ask. Are you aware that I have myself called four times at your house within the last two days, and been rudely denied admittance, though I sent in an express message that I was anxious to speak privately with you?"

"I did not know that you had given yourself that trouble so often," said Margaret quietly. "Our servant has orders to explain that we do not receive visitors. If she did not make the message clear to you, I am sorry."

"But, Miss Blake, surely there are exceptional circumstances. I do not look on myself altogether in the light of an ordinary visitor. I called yesterday, and I propose to come to your house again to-day, to speak to you in a friendly spirit on matters which deeply concern yourself and your family; and I must say that I consider that I deserve more courteous treatment than to have the door closed in my face."

"I will not keep you standing longer in the rain, as it is quite useless for us to discuss the question," Margaret interrupted, with another haughty bow and an attempt to move forward, which Mrs. Lutridge circumvented by tightening her grasp on the arm she held.

"But, Miss Blake, a moment's patience. I really must insist on your hearing me. I have a very special occasion to see your niece. I am entrusted with a communication to her from Mr. Pierrepoint, whose house I have just left, and who is, as you will easily imagine, much concerned at certain events that have recently transpired. I have promised to deliver it to her myself, and I cannot suppose that you will have any objection to her seeing me. I shall call about an hour hence, and I trust that by that time you will have given your servant orders to admit me, and that I shall not again have the annoyance of being turned away from your door—a thing, Miss Blake, to which, I can assure you, I am wholly unaccustomed in Oldbury."

Margaret's large eyes flashed. "I advise you not to trouble yourself to call," she said. "You will certainly not be admitted. I deny your right to speak to me on matters which concern myself or my family. I cannot prevent your saying what you please of us out of our house, but you certainly shall not speak to any one within it. I shall carefully guard my niece from receiving any communication from any one through you. Good morning."

Mrs. Lutridge's detaining hand was paralysed by absolute amazement that any one should have the audacity to speak to her in such a tone, and to look at her with such haughty eyes. Margaret shook her off unceremoniously, and proceeded on her way up the hill. Mrs. Lutridge stared after her for quite a minute before she could believe that she was actually gone and did not mean to come back to apologize, and then she turned round and continued her walk

towards the bridge in a very bewildered state of mind. Never had she been so addressed since the day when she married Mr. Lutridge, and became, in virtue of his wealth and her own determination, the leading lady in Oldbury. Could it really be Oldbury where such an insult had been offered to her? She began to wish heartily that she had not so eagerly undertaken the delivery of this letter. She did not like the thought of exposing herself to Margaret's rudeness again; and yet it would be very disagreeable, after all she had said, to return it to Mr. Pierrepoint, and confess her failure. By the time she had reached the bridge she was in such a breathless state of agitation that she was obliged to pause for a moment, and lean against the parapet to recover herself. She slipped her hand into her reticule, and took out Steenie's letter. She disliked the look of it now as much as Mr. Pierrepoint had done; and then, after all, who could say what was in it? She put down her umbrella—it was hardly raining at all now—and held up the letter against the light. The envelope was large and thin, and the writing distinct, and her eye deciphered a sentence or two that made it seem by no means the sort of farewell letter Mr. Pierrepoint had implied it was. What a shame if the Blakes and his son were deceiving him!

He was not a very strong-minded man, and Mrs. Lutridge had known him give way before in matters where his son was concerned, and act against her most strenuous advice. Suppose it should be so again. If the Blakes should triumph after all, and Elsie reign at the Rectory, in the position about which Mrs. Lutridge had at one time or another woven so many

visions! Oldbury would not be tolerable as a residence if such an event as that ever came to pass; and yet it might happen if the letter she held reached Elsie Blake unaccompanied with any advice from her. It would be a thousand times better for every one concerned if she never got it—a great deal more what Mr. Pierrepoint really wished. Half-unconsciously, as this thought passed through her mind, her fingers relaxed their hold on the envelope; an opportune little gust of wind came. It was all done in a moment. There was a white square of paper fluttering over and over in the air far below the reach of her outstretched hand, which made a desperate clutch to regain it. A white spot on the water beneath, lessening, lessening, lessening, as it rose and fell on successive wavelets, till Mrs. Lutridge's straining eyes could discern it no longer, and then no trace of what had happened anywhere—nothing to be seen by staring down ever so intently at the gurgling, hurrying river, which was not at all likely to bring back anything that had been once entrusted to its keeping. A large drop of rain falling plump on Mrs. Lutridge's nose roused her from her stupified gaze at last. She slowly put up her umbrella, and resumed her walk.

"It was an accident," she said to herself; "but even if it had not been, I should consider that, under the circumstances, and after the manner in which Miss Blake treated me, I was quite justified in taking upon myself to act for the best. Oh no, I don't feel the least uneasy. I am quite satisfied that it is the best thing for all parties that could have happened."

A long course of acting for the best in other people's concerns had brought Mrs. Lutridge's con-

science into a very quiescent state, yet she did feel some unaccustomed prickings when in the course of the afternoon she sat down to write the result of her mission to Mr. Pierrepoint. She had so much comfortable obtuseness and self-sufficiency that it did not often happen to her to find it difficult to render to others such an account of her doings as ministered to her own complacency. To-day she was surprised to discover that she could not put the story of the letter into any words that she liked to imagine Mr. Pierrepoint reading. After several attempts, she contented herself with scribbling a few hasty lines:—

"I saw Miss Blake to-day, after I left you. I will tell you all particulars when we meet, if you like to hear them; but if you should prefer not to recur to so painful a subject, I think you may rest in the assurance that I have done the best I could for all parties, and that you have been spared what would certainly have been an embarrassing interview."

Mr. Pierrepoint received the note when he returned from a round of parochial visiting late in the afternoon. Cecil watched him go out and come in; but in compunction for her over-boldness in the morning, she did not venture to ask any questions. He looked very miserable and worried, and ate nothing at dinner. Cecil guessed that his afternoon had been a trying one, and was very sorry for him, though she felt too much in disgrace to venture on any attempt to cheer him. They hardly spoke all the evening. It was not till quite late, long after Lady Selina had retired to her room, that Cecil stole back to the library for her writing-desk, and then took courage to linger an instant by her uncle's chair and say softly,—

"She has had the letter, has she not?"

"Yes," Mr. Pierrepoint answered shortly; "and if you are going to write to Steenie you may tell him so. I don't feel equal to writing to-night."

Cecil's letter to Steenie took some time to compose. She had been in the constant habit of corresponding with him, and had never had any difficulty when he was away before in filling sheet after sheet with merry descriptions of home doings. To write on a grave subject was a different thing; and she felt depressed by the thought that, in spite of all her persistence, she had not been able to learn anything that he would care to know, that would make her poor little letter of consequence to him.

"I am in a horrible state of disgust with myself," she wrote at last. "I worried my uncle with my anxiety this morning, and took such liberties that I have almost made him hate me, and yet I have learned nothing of what you will most care to be told. I am afraid I must confess that your father looks very, very unhappy, and that I don't in the least know how to comfort him. I wish I had more sense. I almost forced him to show me the letters this morning, and now I think I did very wrong, and shame for my bad manners has kept me silent to-night. I saw him go out and come in, and I know he took the letter to her as you asked, but I have not dared to ask a single question about how she received it. How angry you will be with me.

"But I think you would have been as silent yourself if you had seen his worried face to-night. He just told me she had the letter, and that was all he said. Do you know, I think that, considering how

unhappy he is, it was very good of him to let her have it at once, and that we must not quarrel with him for not talking about it? The letter must have comforted her; I try to satisfy myself with that thought. Miss Berry called at the house late this afternoon, and heard that Mrs. Blake had suddenly become much worse, and is not expected to live many days. She thought she got a glimpse of Elsie's head at the window of one of the upper rooms. That is all I can tell you; and now I must go to bed. I hope, meagre as this is, that you will like it a little better than getting no letter at all. Your father says he cannot write just yet."

Mrs. Lutridge took a very severe cold in consequence of her wet walk on the day of her interview with Mr. Pierrepoint, and suffered from its effects more severely than was usual with her. For some days she was restless and feverish, and could not with all her efforts banish the thoughts of that walk through the rain from her mind. Whenever she closed her eyes the wavelets of the Idle whirled and swam before them, and in her dreams she was always bending frantically over the parapet of the bridge to catch something that floated out of her grasp. She grew seriously alarmed about her own state of health. "It was clear," she observed to Mr. Lutridge, "that at length her constant exertions for the welfare of her neighbours and the good of Oldbury were beginning to tell upon her." Dr. Tomkinson, who was called in, prescribed change of scene and complete relaxation from all her ordinary occupations; and, to the intense joy of all her daughters, Mrs. Lutridge consented to believe that it would be possible for her to leave Old-

bury to take care of itself for a while. A visit to Boulogne, which they had long been struggling to obtain, was decided on all in a hurry; and on the very next Sunday the National School children exchanged congratulatory glances with each other as they pointed to the Lutridges' great red-lined pew with nothing more formidable than Mr. Lutridge's meek bald head showing over its side.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death.

THE first days and weeks that pass after the advent of a great affliction are not by any means those of severest suffering. While grief is allowed to retain undivided sway over the heart, while the head is bowed low for all the waves of woe to pass over it, there is a sense of rest in utter self-abandonment which, in an aftertime, when the struggle to stand up under the bitter waters has begun, we look back upon with envy of ourselves for having felt. It is a kind of death that has come into our hearts. For a little while all our faculties lie benumbed and stilled; what we dread is the awakening. We know the pain that is coming, but we don't feel it just at first. We keep it outside of us a little time, holding it mentally at arms'-length while we look in its terrible face and learn its likeness. "Oh," we groan, "if we could escape having to stand up and fight it; if the chill of the first touch would but strike deep enough and end all for us; if we need never drag the bleeding life up from the ground again and know the full torture of the wounds that have hardly begun to ache yet. From this dumb stage of grief to the first faint glow of victory and healing there is a weary weary road, a valley of the shadow of death, which every one who enters in has to traverse alone.

Margaret understood this; she was very patient

with Elsie in the first days of bewildered misery that followed Stephen's departure from Oldbury. She did not make any useless attempts to comfort her or reason with her, or urge the duty of resignation upon her. The time for these would come, but it was not yet. Elsie was thankful to be let alone. It was not her lover only she had lost, it was her whole life—all her dreams in the past, all her hopes and thoughts of herself in future—that had been shattered by a single blow.

It was long, very long before any coherence of thought came. Her recollection of the interview in the library was full of vague horror. She was like a person in a nightmare dream; wandering among unsightly heaps of ruins, and turning shudderingly away from one dismal sight after another only to meet the same ghastly desolation everywhere. The mere sound of Margaret's voice at times made her feel sick with pain. Let her be speaking of what she would, the low, quiet tones always seemed to Elsie to have in them the terrible words that had destroyed all her happiness and killed her very self—as she believed then.

The one thing that saved her from sinking under her grief, was the necessity for exertion which her grandmother's increasing illness laid upon her.

"Miss Elsie, you must not let yourself be ill," Crawford urged continually. "Think of her who has been good to you ever since you were born, and don't give her the pain of missing you just the last days, when you can comfort her by looking as usual. You can look as you like when she is gone."

The motive for self-restraint was the strongest that

could have been put before Elsie. She did her best, and was benefited by having to turn her thoughts from herself. She went in and out of her grandmother's room, and sat long hours by her bedside, and never omitted any of the services she had been accustomed to perform for her; but all her efforts could not conceal the change that had come over her from the fond old eyes that never, while there was consciousness in them, ceased to study her face.

The wistful question in her grandmother's eyes, which her lips could not frame, went down into Elsie's heart, and gave her the relief of a change of pain. That mute expression of sympathy was the only one she could have borne to receive just then.

One day when she was off her guard, believing her grandmother to be asleep, and had thrown herself down on the ground in a paroxysm of mental anguish such as makes the body instinctively seek the lowest position as the fittest to be in, she was startled by hearing Mrs. Blake call her name in a distincter tone than she had uttered for many days.

"Elsie, darling, come to me."

The stricken figure struggled to raise itself in the bed, and the withered arms to stretch themselves out to her in the old protecting, motherly way. Elsie rose with a cry, and threw herself on the bed by her grandmother's side.

"What can I do? Help me," she sobbed. The dead sullen weight of pain was lifted from her heart. She felt as if an iron band that had held her thoughts imprisoned, and prevented her seeking Divine or human aid, had been struck away, and she was free

to indulge the natural yearning for sympathy and comfort once more.

"What shall I do? How can I ever bear my life? Tell me," she repeated, propping her head on her elbow, and gazing at Mrs. Blake's face as if her only hope depended on her being able to speak again.

There was a painful effort, and then the trembling lips formed another distinct word. "Pray," Mrs. Blake at last said, "pray."

Elsie laid her head back on the pillow again, and strove hard to subdue her sobs and moans into quietness. A sense of peace and rest and withdrawal out of herself crept over her as she lay by her grandmother's side. Mrs. Blake's lips continued to murmur indistinct sounds, and Elsie's ear was so near them that she could, by catching a clearly uttered word here and there, make out the sentence she was repeating over and over to herself.

"Oh, how many and great troubles and sorrows hast Thou showed me! and yet——"

Memory apparently did not supply the succeeding verses of the psalm from which she was quoting, for she always paused at the same word; but her eyes said the rest. They were fixed and raised, seeing something, Elsie perceived plainly enough, other than what she saw—something that lay beyond the many and great troubles, the near perception of which dwarfed them all now into matters of simple, wondering, childish inquiry. "'How many and great troubles hast Thou showed me,' Thou whom I perceive to have been behind them all, compared to whom sorrows and joys are alike vain, transitory shows!"

An awful but sustaining sense of the reality and

nearness of the unseen came into Elsie's heart as she watched her grandmother's face.

"You will go, and I shall be left to bear alone," she was tempted to murmur; but, with her head resting against her grandmother's pale cheek and her arms round her, she could not feel the difference between the beginning and the end so very great, or count the life that lay between of so much importance as it had seemed a few hours before. She awoke out of the deadness and hardness of despairing sorrow and began the battle of life again.

Mrs. Blake never spoke distinctly again after that day; but she watched Elsie with pitying, wistful eyes to the very end, and Elsie knew that her last thoughts and last murmured prayers were for her. It was a gradual, silent, breathless creeping of death into the still, shut-up house. As the days passed, Elsie could not help feeling that to others as well as herself this was an exceptional interval of time, not to be taken into account in judging of their doings. Things could not go on like this for ever; air and sunshine and news from the outer world must come at last. They were not all dead and forgotten; people's recollection of them could not be altogether blotted out; a return to their every-day course of life must inevitably come, and names never pronounced now would be heard again in her ears. Her first effort after resignation, which gave renewed life to her heart, was succeeded by a little feeble upspringing of hope. Pain and struggle came with it, but it was healthier than despair. She was seized with a vehement longing to go out of the house and see fresh faces, and hear—yes, that was it—just hear Stephen Pierrepoint's name men-

tioned, and listen while people spoke of him as if he were alive and real. The way in which he had slipped from her in the darkness of her swoon had left a very painful impression on her mind. Nothing, she thought, would bridge over the horror so well as hearing commonplace talk about him from people who knew nothing of her misery. She wanted to have her old impression of him restored; when she could recall his face as she had always seen it but that once, gay, courageous, happy, with love in his eyes when he looked at her; a sensation of warmth came back to her heart. She could not then believe that he would turn away from her, and leave her to suffer alone. He loved her; and what did love mean but faithfullest sharing together of sorrow, and joy, and pain, till life ended. She strove to think this, but she could never keep the happy recollection for long together; a vision of his face as she had last seen it, when he stood listening to Margaret in the library, always came and blotted out the other brighter picture. What was there in his eyes when he had looked up at last? What sort of resolution was it that had made his lips pale, and contracted his brows with pain? Elsie used to sit for hours by her grandmother's bed-side in a sort of trance, staring into the dim corners of the darkened room, and trying to bring back that face before her eyes and read it.

When Margaret came behind her, as she often did, and put her arm round her neck and recalled her to the duties of the sick-room by some little word, the effort to pluck her thoughts back, and understand what was going on round her, gave her a sensation of positive physical pain. There lay the still form on

the bed, where life was slowly, surely, noiselessly ebbing into eternity, and she had been letting her heart grow hot and restless with selfish anxieties and cares.

"My poor child," Margaret said one evening, when during the day, Elsie's restlessness had taken the form of constant pacings backwards and forwards, and startings at every footfall on the gravelled walk outside the house. "My poor darling, the one thing I have dreaded for you is uncertainty, heartsick, waiting for what will never come. You may not think so now; but, indeed, long-continued anxiety is the worst pain of all. I have tried to save you from it, though, perhaps, you will quarrel with what I have done. It is not his fault that he does not come or write to you. I made him promise not to attempt to draw you into an unsanctioned engagement. I stipulated that he should tell his father all, and do nothing against his wishes. It was my duty to require this. We must not forget our self-respect, Elsie. We must not spread evil; I have always striven earnestly not to do that. We must be careful not to thrust our burdens on those who are not called to bear them, who can stand aloof if they please."

"But he can't stand aloof, he loves me!" said Elsie; "I thought so at least, I thought so."

"Yes," said Margaret gravely; "but, my poor child, you have still to learn that love does not mean the same to every one. There are many other considerations that weigh with men besides love. In such a case as this no one could blame him for giving you up."

And then Margaret, taking Elsie's hand and hold-

ing it firmly, as one who holds a patient's hand while a painful operation is endured, began for the first time to speak to her of her father; a few little, low-spoken words, with many pauses between. She talked first of his boyhood, when she had been the petted baby-sister, and he the admired, protecting elder brother. She told how his mother had doted on him; how she used to miss him when he went away to school and college; and how his return had always been the signal for festivity and rejoicing in their quiet studious household. Then a little later, after his marriage, how they had wondered and sometimes trembled a little at his sudden worldly prosperity. How rumours of the splendid gay life he and his beautiful wife were leading reached them in their comparative obscurity. And then Margaret paused for a long time, and, when she spoke again, took up her history at a different point. She described the long years of degradation and punishment, comprising nearly all Elsie's life, which he had worn through; told how terrible his remorse had been; what an old, wearied-out, feeble man he was now; how all through his worst times of suffering the thought of seeing his child again, and winning her love before she should have heard anything to turn her heart from him, had been his one stronghold of comfort. Margaret said she had never felt it right that Elsie should be kept in ignorance of her father's history. She had wished to prepare her from the first for the life of self-renunciation which (according to her views) her father's crimes entailed on her; but there had been a promise made which her grandfather and grandmother felt bound to keep, and she had been obliged to acquiesce against her judgment.

Elsie sat low on the ground while Margaret talked, trying hard to suppress the shudderings that would come over her at some of the words that fell so familiarly from Margaret's lips; endeavouring to force her thoughts to take in the image of that miserable sin-stained man, who was the reality that lay behind the bright dream of an ideal father she had so often pleased herself with calling up; praying earnestly, in the pauses of Margaret's speech, for strength to overcome the horror of him—the bitter, hard resentment against him as the destroyer of all her happiness in life, which threatened to surge up in her heart and drown the pity Margaret's words were meant to excite.

"He is your father, and you are the only person in the world who can comfort him," Margaret said. "He can never see his father or mother, or me, without remembering what we have suffered through him. We only bring him pain. But he hopes to come before you as one restored from the dead, and to begin a new life with you, unembittered by sorrowful memories. Dearest, I must say this to you, Don't let your own loss and pain shut your heart against him. I know what the struggle will be. Have I not struggled and failed often, and learned at last that victory can only be gained in the strength of Him who knew how to suffer for all, and yet love all? Is it not something to have to struggle that we may enter into His Spirit, and live in the shadow of His cross?"

Elsie looked up suddenly into Margaret's face. It had not the still, passionless look it usually wore; there was a high heroic expression, almost a halo of glory resting on it. Yet it did not look beautiful to

Elsie at that moment. She turned away her head with a petulant movement of pain. The strain was too high for her just then. She looked back on Margaret's life, and thought of all the years of it she could remember—the silent, joyless years that had slipped on and worn and moulded her face to the look it wore now. Oh, what a hard-won victory! Her soul sickened and died within her at the prospect of having to tread such a dreary round to gain an end so far, so very far, beyond her present comprehension.

"But it is dreadful," she said, "to think of so many people suffering all through their lives for one other person's sin. It seems hard that so many should be dragged into the punishment who had no share in the sin."

"Hard, and yet hopeful, I think," said Margaret, "if we can only learn to look upon our losses and griefs as evidence of our communion in the work of the Great Atoner. But I will not say more to you now, dearest, for it will not help you yet; sustaining thoughts will come to you, as they have come to me." And Margaret stooped down and kissed Elsie's forehead softly, and they kept the rest of their long night-watch together in silence.

CHAPTER IX.

Parting.

EARLY in the morning of the next day, the moment they had been so long dreading came. Mrs. Blake breathed her last breath tranquilly, and there was an end of all their loving tendance and anxiety for her. The change seemed so slight at first, that it was difficult to realize what had happened. The full understanding of their loss came with the painful sense of leisure that fell on them when the beloved face was finally hidden from their eyes, and the room where they had been spending the greater part of their time was left vacant.

Elsie was free then to wander about the house, and stand looking at the little slit in the door through which Cecil's letter had come to her with a vague thought in her mind that while she was watching it there was a greater likelihood than there had ever been before of another letter falling through at her feet; and she could lean on the garden wall late in the afternoons, and watch the little lights springing up in the town at her feet, and try to make out the windows of the Rectory for an hour or so at a time without any one reproving her, or noticing what she was doing.

She had fits of remorse for being able to grieve for anything but the loss she had sustained, and she missed her grandmother more sorely every day as the

impression of the last weeks of suffering faded from her mind, and her thoughts reverted to earlier days, when Mrs. Blake had been her constant, loving, gentle companion, and cheerful playmate.

"How could she be that?" Elsie asked herself. "How could she?"

Her grandmother's peaceful, tender resignation was a greater problem to her now than Margaret's sadness had been in the old time. Sometimes, as she recalled the sweet even tones of Mrs. Blake's voice, and her gentle smile that had never changed or failed, she grew impatient, and almost rebelled against the memory, or rather against the lesson it read her.

"How could she have attained to such grace? How could she?" Elsie understood now, and trembled at the thought of the dire struggles and terrible pains that must have been endured before that peace had been reached. She felt like a traveller entering on a dark cavern, where a dim, far-off spot of light only seems to show the hopeless distance from the entrance to the end. Margaret had many serious anxieties, quite unconnected with Elsie's, that pressed on her during the days that preceded and followed Mrs. Blake's funeral. Much necessary business not usually undertaken by the women of a family fell on her, and she was struck and pained by the manner towards her of the people with whom she had to deal. There was a rude curiosity and want of respect shown her, such as she had never before had to endure from Oldbury tradespeople even in the days of their unpopularity, when they first came to the town.

The churchyard was very much crowded with spectators on the afternoon of Mrs. Blake's funeral;

and pre-occupied as Margaret was, she overheard words and saw curious looks directed towards them which convinced her that the unhappy circumstances of their family history had become the subject of common gossip and notoriety throughout Oldbury. Could it be the Pierrepoints' doing? The suspicion made Margaret very angry when she thought it over, and came to the conclusion that from no other source than this could have come the information that was causing so much excitement. Mrs. Lutridge had been active in spreading it no doubt, but she must have heard the tale from one of them at first. Margaret grew more and more hopeless on Elsie's account, as she meditated on this proof of want of consideration for their feelings, and felt impatient to take her away from the neighbourhood of the Pierrepoints, beyond the risk of encounters that could only bring embarrassment and pain.

Other events speedily occurred to show how unfit a place of residence Oldbury was for people who had a weak place in their history, of which its inhabitants had an inkling. The very first time after the funeral that old Mr. Blake ventured out to walk in the road, he was annoyed by groups of children collecting to stare after him, and call him by a name he had not been addressed by for twenty years. He had a terrible fit of nervous irritation when he re-entered the house, and Margaret was convinced of the necessity of getting him away from Oldbury as quickly as possible. She had long since made arrangements for giving up their house in the spring of the ensuing year. She had always felt that it would not be desirable to bring her brother to live in Oldbury; and now the term of his

imprisonment was drawing to a close. The representations of friends, whose services in his behalf they secured during their last absence from home, had availed to procure a remittance of some years of his punishment, and they hoped to have him restored to them early in the coming spring. Instead of remaining in Oldbury till within a week or two of his release, Margaret now determined to make the meditated change of abode at once. They had still friends and relations in London, on whose kindness in cases of emergency they could rely. Since Elsie now knew her father's history there was no longer any necessity for keeping her apart from them, and during the days that succeeded Mrs. Blake's death Margaret talked a good deal to Elsie about her unknown relations, and tried to interest her in the prospect of seeing them soon.

Elsie heard with surprise that her mother's mother, Mrs. Neale, was still living, and that it was to her house Margaret and Mr. and Mrs. Blake had gone during those periodical absences from home, which had for their chief object the sad visit to the prisoner at Dartmoor they had never failed to make twice every year. Mrs. Neale lived alone for the greater part of the year in her house in London.

There had always been, Margaret told Elsie, a close intimacy between the Neales and the Le Fevres, even before the marriage of Elsie's father and mother had connected them.

The two families lived in neighbouring squares in London, and spent several weeks of every autumn together at Thoresby, the Neales' old rambling manor-house in Yorkshire, about which Elsie had heard, and

built castles in the air in her childhood. Margaret did not speak much of the old times, but Elsie gathered enough from words dropped here and there to understand the principal events that preceded the break-up of the family. She learned how her merry, light-hearted mother had been wooed and won almost before she had passed beyond the years of her childhood, and how her bright butterfly life had been crushed out at once by the weight of the trouble that came. The names of her mother's two brothers, Walter and Gilbert Neale, were seldom mentioned by Margaret in her narratives; but one day she let Elsie know that Gilbert Neale was the lover who had given her up, and in a few words told what the history of their love had been. How it had begun on his side, when he, the cleverest of the Neale family, had asked to share her studies with her father during one of their long autumn visits to Thoresby; and how in her heart it had grown gradually year by year, as the work for her father, to which she had devoted herself, approached completion, and she felt at liberty to turn her thoughts to other interests and hopes. Then, when she was happiest, the blow fell that divided them for ever. Gilbert Neale's love for his brother had proved stronger than his attachment to Margaret; from the moment of his brother's death he had withdrawn from all intercourse with the Le Fevre family, and taken an active part in the investigations that had led to Herbert Le Fevre's conviction and long punishment. "It was right," Margaret said gravely; "right. Better for your father himself that his guilt should be brought to light and that he should have to bear its punishment —far better and safer for him, than if he had been

permitted to escape. But oh, how thankful I have been that it was not my husband who had to appear against my brother! Gilbert would have been my husband then, if my determination not to leave my father till his work was finished had not delayed our marriage. As it is, I have been permitted to bear the sorrow and the shame alone. I have not handed it down to any child of mine, or brought it on kindred who would have grudged the bearing it with me."

Elsie had no answer to make to such words as these. She could not acquiesce, as Margaret hoped she would; she could only turn away her head to hide the blinding tears that sprang into her eyes. She felt that if she had been Margaret she should not have been thankful for the resolution that had prevented the marriage taking place while it had been possible. It would have been the bitterest part of her regret that the delay had been her own doing. For her part, she had rather have had her lover bound to her for ever before the blow came, and trusted to the strength of her own devotion not to let it divide them then. She would have borne the suffering so bravely with him; she would have clung to him so closely, if only the right had been hers; she would have defied sorrow or shame to thrust them apart, if once they had belonged to each other.

About a week after Mrs. Blake's funeral, Margaret put into Elsie's hand a letter from her grandmother, Mrs. Neale, containing a very cordial invitation for them all to come up to her house in London, and stay with her till some fresh place of abode could be fixed upon. Margaret had written to tell of their

present discomfort at Oldbury, and to consult her about taking lodgings for them in London; and this was her answer.

Elsie read the letter through in silence, and her face grew very pale. "Aunt Margaret—when?" was all she could say as she gave it back.

Margaret kissed her gently. "At once, I think, dearest," she said; "there is no use lingering over what is so painful to us all. We shall most probably go abroad in the spring, when your father comes to us; we shall not take another house in England. This furniture and our books had better be sold here. Crawford will stay for a few days after us to attend to all the necessary arrangements, but we had better go. You know it would be torture to your grandfather to see anything of the kind going on. We must take him away with as little bustle of preparation as possible. We shall all feel better when we have left Oldbury. The curiosity about us, and the ill-will that gossiping tongues have aroused, are so strong just now that we can have neither privacy nor peace here. You see, dear, even Miss Berry, the kindest creature in the world, keeps away from us now, while other people are rude and intrusive."

"It is our own fault," said Elsie, a little bitterly. "We have kept every one away from us; we have never given our neighbours a chance of knowing or loving us. No wonder they are easily turned against us."

"We have done what we believed to be our duty," Margaret answered. "When we first came here, your grandfather and grandmother and I agreed that we could not allow our new neighbours, who were

ignorant of our true position, to be drawn into intimacies with us. As years passed on I began to dread for you the very trial that, in spite of my precautions, has come. We shall all be happier away from Oldbury now, dear."

During the busy days that followed, Elsie hardly realized what was coming. She had a bewildered desire to stop the minutes from carrying her onwards; but Margaret kept her employed. The hours slipped by, and very quickly the last afternoon that they were to spend in Oldbury came.

Margaret told Elsie that she would walk down the town with her to call at Miss Berry's house and wish her good-bye, and then visit the churchyard once more, and take a last look at the grave they were leaving there. Elsie longed to say she should prefer to go alone, but she had learned to be more considerate of Margaret's feelings now, and she would not hurt her by seeming indifferent to her sympathy.

The necessary preparations for the morrow could not be quickly got through, and it was getting late; the autumn evening was beginning to close in when Margaret and Elsie set out on their walk.

It was a still November day, with a tender grey sky overhead, and all the fields and meadows beneath stretching out wide and bare to the misty purple hills in the horizon. Little lights began to start up here and there as they approached the town. Elsie remembered the delight and wonder with which she used to watch them when she was a child. Oldbury, with its irregularly-built sloping streets, was a pretty town to walk through in the twilight. Cecil had once said it was like some foreign town; and immediately

Elsie's thoughts were busy calling up the occasion and the time when the remark had been made, making out where they had all stood,—she, and Cecil, and Stephen Pierrepoint,—and the look that had come on his face when he had refused to allow any town the honour of being compared to Oldbury, and when Cecil had rallied him on his sudden enthusiasm for his native place.

Meanwhile they had reached Miss Berry's house. The door was opened for them by Miss Berry's servant Caroline, in one of her most gracious moods.

Her mistress was out. She had gone to spend the afternoon with Mrs. Adams, who was ill; but would they not step in and wait till she came home?

Margaret hesitated, but Elsie passed before her into the little sitting-room. At all events she would wish that good-bye. It looked the same, just the same as when she had spent such happy hours there. Her own little book-case, with the German books carefully dusted, and looking bright as if they were in constant use still; the lamp, Miss Berry's work-basket, with what looked like the very same piece of knitting in it that Elsie knew so well. Elsie went up to each of these objects, and touched them in turn. "Ah, good-bye, good-bye!" Her hands lingered on them, and clung to the senseless things as if she could not bring her wasted farewells to an end.

Then she turned to the window-seat where she had sat and cried about nothing one foolish afternoon. She looked across towards the Rectory; it had a more wide-awake aspect than usual. Some slight bustle of preparation was going on there. A window in the upper story stood wide open, and a maid-servant was

putting up fresh curtains in the room. Life was going on there. He was coming home again, now that she was going away. Margaret's eye had perhaps fallen on the same tokens too, for she began to be anxious to leave the house.

"I am afraid we must not wait longer," she said; "Grandpapa will be uneasy about us if we are not home before it is quite dark. There are writing-materials on the table; I will write a line of farewell to Miss Berry, and of thanks for all her kindness."

"Oh no, no, let me write!" cried Elsie. She took the paper and pen from Margaret's hand; but when she tried to write, no words at all answering to the passion of grief in her heart would come to her.

"Good-bye, dear friend! Good-bye," she wrote, while the tears swelled in her eyes. "We are going away from Oldbury; we shall never see you again; good-bye, good-bye! Think of me sometimes. Talk a little about me to Oldbury people; don't let every one think ill of us, or forget us quite. I shall never love any place like Oldbury—never be happy anywhere else. Good-bye for ever from Elsie!"

As she finished writing, the flood-gates of long-suppressed grief broke forth, and a storm of tears fell down and blistered the paper. Margaret let her weep unrestrainedly for a while, and then came to her and raised her head, which she had bent down on the table, and put away her wet hair from her face.

"We have another sad visit to pay, dearest. I am sure you will wish to leave sufficient time for that," she said gravely; and Elsie was awed into quietness and self-command again.

They had some distance to walk before they

reached the entrance to that part of the churchyard where Mrs. Blake's grave lay; but the moon had risen, and, looking down dim and watery through the thin clouds, showed them the path to the newly-turfed hillock. They stood side by side, looking at it in silence. Elsie did not weep here. She had shed all her tears, and she had a twinge of remorse for feeling now so stupid and dead, as if nothing could ever be of much moment to her again. She stood as in a dream, staring blankly down at the squares of half-dead turf lightly laid over the mound. The minutest particulars of the scene were stamping themselves on her mind, to be recalled with tender yearning hereafter; but now she seemed to herself to be stupidly unconscious of what it was that lay at her feet. Margaret was far the most deeply moved. This was parting from Oldbury to her, and it was a very bitter parting. She was leaving behind all that was remained to her of the one tender friend and confidant who had been with her in all her sorrows, and whose sympathy had never failed. She knelt down by the grave for a few moments, and covered her face with her hands, then hastily gathered a few blades of the half-dead grass and put them in her glove.

"Come away," she said when she rose from her knees; "we are not leaving her behind. This is not she—it is only the precious outward form that will be kept safely and given back to us one day. In whatever distant place we lie down to sleep, we shall meet and find each other out then. Let us go. She would not have had us neglect one of the smallest of our duties to mourn by her grave."

They left the churchyard by a side gate which

opened on one of the narrow streets leading to the river. Groups of idle men and boys were standing about, and as Margaret and Elsie passed among them they were annoyed and frightened by hearing their names spoken derisively, and by one or two of the roughest lads pressing forwards to stare at them and jostle them in the pathway. Margaret drew Elsie's hand under her arm.

"We ought not to have stayed out so late; but never mind," she said encouragingly, "we shall soon be in the better-lighted streets. Don't let them see that you are frightened."

"There is some one following us," said Elsie nervously, after a minute or two.

"Don't look back," said Margaret; "we shall be in the High Street soon."

But the quick steps—a man's footsteps—gained on them, and there was something in their ring that made Elsie's heart beat quickly; then a tall figure stepped into sight, and a familiar voice addressed them. The wild flicker of hope went out, and left Elsie to discover how very sick and faint the fright and the disappointment had made her. The moonlight showed plainly the elder Mr. Pierrepoint politely lifting his hat and addressing Margaret.

"You must allow me to walk by your side till you get home," he said; "there are ill-disposed people about, and it is late for you to walk in this part of the town unprotected."

Margaret replied with a brief but courteous "thank you;" and when Mr. Pierrepoint went round to Elsie's side and insisted on her accepting the support of his arm, she added a few more words of gratitude for

his opportune interference on their behalf. She saw that Elsie was trembling so as to be quite unable to stand alone, and she felt really thankful to be relieved from the uncomfortable situation they were in.

Mr. Pierrepoint felt how the small fingers shook that Elsie placed on his arm, and a sudden rush of kind protecting fatherly feeling came over him towards this timid girl whom his son loved. He put his hand over the fluttering fingers, and said encouragingly:

"Don't be alarmed, I will take care of you till you get home."

Elsie looked up into his face, and a sudden resolution came to her too. She was close to the man who held her fate in his hands—her fate, her life. She could not plead for herself with him—no, not for a thousand lives—but she could not be altogether passive; she must let him know that this was probably the last time in all their lives that they should ever walk side by side, and have a chance of exchanging words with each other—they two, who had surely one strong feeling of their hearts in common.

"This is to be our last evening in Oldbury," she said; "we are going quite away to-morrow, never to come back again. We have been paying a farewell visit to the churchyard."

Margaret in Elsie's place would rather have died than have spoken such words in such a sad little pleading voice, with such a look, appealing against the woe of leaving Oldbury, as that which came from under Elsie's tear-wet eyelashes. She could not have spoken so herself, and her heart beat quickly and

proudly as she watched the effect Elsie's words had on Mr. Pierrepoint.

He started, and there was a visible change of countenance. "Indeed!" he said in a tone of surprise —pleased surprise Margaret thought it was. "I had no idea of this. So soon; are we losing you so soon? I had not heard anything about your going."

"No," Margaret answered; "it has been rather a sudden resolution. Various circumstances have occurred which would make a longer residence in Oldbury painful to us."

There was a pause of some minutes, and then Mr. Pierrepoint, turning away his eyes from Elsie, said slowly:

"I am sorry, very sorry, that anything should have occurred to distress you in Oldbury; but I confess I think you are acting wisely—and permit me to say, under all the circumstances, honourably—in choosing another residence."

They had turned into the brightly lighted High Street, and Margaret could see Mr. Pierrepoint's face quite plainly. She scanned it as closely as she had done on a former occasion, and came to a somewhat similar conclusion from what she read there. For Elsie's sake she was anxious to know exactly how he was disposed towards them, and as she finished her study of his countenance she felt that she did know. He was sorry for them, very sorry. She no longer believed that it was he who had betrayed their secret. He would not willingly injure them; he could not bear to see them insulted; only he had rather not see or hear anything about them. He wanted them to take away the burden of their dangers and their dis-

grace from contact with him and his. He had no impulse moving him to help them to bear it. Let them make haste to pass out of his life, and give him and his son leave to forget them, and all the pain they had caused. Any slight hope for Elsie that Margaret had entertained passed utterly out of her mind as she turned her head away. She felt thankful she had acted with promptitude, and by taking her niece away from Oldbury saved her from the slights and humiliations and weary alternations between hope and despair to which she would certainly have been exposed if she had been tempted to enter into a private engagement with Stephen, which must have depended more or less on Mr. Pierrepoint's will for its fulfilment. Any present pain Margaret decided was better for her than such a position as that.

Occupied with these thoughts, Margaret walked up the hill in silence. When they came within sight of their house, she paused.

"We need not trouble you to go further out of your way," she said; "we are quite safe here, within sight of our own garden."

"Nay," said Mr. Pierrepoint, "let me walk with you up to the house door."

There was a little flurry and agitation in his voice as he spoke. He was debating with himself, battling with himself, whether or not he should say some words he wished, yet dreaded to utter. He was afraid of being whirled on, in the impulse of speaking, to commit himself in a way he knew he should regret all his life afterwards; and yet conscience, and the recollection that he should meet his son that evening, forbade him to remain altogether silent.

Margaret held out her hand when they had reached the door-step to bid him good-bye.

He held it a second longer than necessary.

"You saw Mrs. Lutridge one day after she had been with me?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Yes," answered Margaret quickly. A warm flush rose to her cheek at the recollection of the interview, but she had no wish to be drawn into an expression of her opinion respecting the impropriety of Mrs. Lutridge's interference in their affairs just then.

Mr. Pierrepoint was baffled, but he made one effort more.

"You are really going to-morrow? Have you, either of you, any message you would wish me to give to any friend who may be surprised and pained to hear of your sudden departure?"

He was still holding Margaret's hand, but he looked at Elsie. Oh! if any word would come to her to say, any little word! But with Margaret's eyes and Mr. Pierrepoint's fixed on her face, how could she speak? Her lips clove together. A great sob rose in her throat. If she uttered anything, she felt it would be a bitter inarticulate cry from the pain she was in.

Margaret waited a minute, and then answered:

"We have no message, but our best wishes for the future well-doing of all who are interested in us. We should be sorry to think that any recollections of us should cloud their happiness, or interfere with their prospects in life in any way."

"Miss Blake, I have no words to say how much I honour and thank you," Mr. Pierrepoint exclaimed, warmly wringing her hand.

"Farewell," Margaret answered, resolutely releasing her fingers from his grasp, and turning away towards the door, not so quickly, however, but that he had time to catch something of the same well-remembered look and smile that had wounded him so deeply once before.

As he walked back down the hill he had again a perception of having been weighed in a balance and found wanting; but this time it did not make him merely angry or indignant. A deeper feeling had been roused; a sense of inferiority, of weakness, of dissatisfaction with his own character, came over him. He seemed to perceive that a higher good than he had had worthiness to seize had come near him, and that he had placed himself definitely on a lower level of endeavour by having turned away from it.

He was by no means a stranger to self-examination. He constantly felt real repentance for daily misdeeds; but the glimpse of his true self which came to him through a perception of Margaret's nobleness brought a deeper humiliation and more wholesome sorrow than any he had hitherto experienced.

The Blakes left Oldbury early the next morning. Margaret drew down her veil, and would not trust herself to look out as they drove from their house to the railway-station at the bottom of the town. But Elsie sat close to the carriage-window, and devoured with her eyes each well-known beloved object as they passed: the shop men and women arranging their goods at their open doors; the charity school-children, in their frightful uniform of Mrs. Lutridge's invention, walking in procession up the hill; the daws flying round the old church tower; the country people com-

ing into the town over the bridge with their market-baskets on their heads. Happy people who were staying behind, and might any day see the face she should never see again! Happy birds that might fly near him! Happy streets where his steps would be, and hers never, never again!

Suddenly a vivid colour flew into Elsie's face; she made a little movement, as if she would rise from her seat and put her head from the window, then checked herself, and sank into the farthest corner of the carriage, whiter than she had been crimson a minute before. She had seen him. They had passed Stephen Pierrepoint walking quickly up the street, with his eyes fixed on the ground. He had not seen them, at least Elsie thought not. Just at the last moment, when they had passed him, she fancied he raised his head; but it was too late, she should never know whether he caught a last partial glimpse of her or not; never be able to satisfy herself about what sort of look would have come on his face if he had turned his head sooner and discovered who was near.

Yet she was glad it had happened; glad to know he was in Oldbury again, though she was leaving the place. She could not feel quite cut off from him while he was surrounded by objects on which her eyes had rested so lately, to which she had just breathed such passionate farewells, which must surely give out some thoughts of her to him.

The train was starting when they reached the station. Elsie and Mr. Blake took their seats in the carriage at once, while Margaret went for their tickets and saw the luggage labelled. It seemed a pandemonium of confusion and noise and horror to Elsie,

who had had no previous experience of railway stations; and she had to control her own grief to speak soothingly to her grandfather, who was disturbed at not being able to help Margaret, and nervous at the bare possibility of her being left behind. At last Margaret came back and got into the carriage, and the train began to move. Elsie put her head out of the window for a last look; a cloud of escaped steam intercepted her view, and when it cleared away the scene was changed; the station was a red brick building, dwindling second by second into a mere speck. They were away among green fields, with cattle instead of people staring into the carriages. Oldbury was a town of toy houses climbing a miniature hill, then they lost sight of it altogether. Elsie sat back and drew her veil over her face. The parting was over, and for the next three or four hours, while Mr. Blake slept in his seat, and Margaret seemed to occupy herself with a book she had brought with her, she was free to live all its minutes over and over again in thought, and sound the depths of the river of pain she had waded through.

CHAPTER X.

A Contrast.

CECIL had returned to London, and was plunged at once into a whirl of excitement and business that contrasted strangely with the quiet she had left behind her at Oldbury. Her father had accepted the official appointment that had been offered to him, and was to sail for China in a few weeks. He had consented to take Cecil with him, and as his time was much taken up with public business, a great deal of the labour of preparation for the voyage fell on her. The mornings were spent in receiving directions from her father, or copying letters and memoranda for him; her afternoons in driving about to shops and warehouses; and the evenings had to be given up to receiving farewell visits from friends and relations, who had returned early to London that autumn in order to see something of Sir Cecil before he sailed. She had few opportunities of being alone with her father, and in the midst of all the bustle of occupation and society she felt strangely lonely, and cut off from all that had interested her during the past summer, Stephen Pierrepoint left Eaton Square the day after she returned, to go to Cambridge, and thence for a week to Oldbury. She longed for him to come back while he was away; but when he was again under the same roof with her, she found his presence did not make as much difference to her as she had expected. She saw hardly anything

of him. Sir Cecil took it for granted that his nephew was to go abroad with them, and always spoke of it as a settled thing. Steenie professed not to have made up his mind, but he threw himself energetically into the whirlpool of business in which they were all involved directly he entered the house, and seemed as unable to be drawn out of it for a few moments' quiet as Sir Cecil himself.

Cecil discovered one day, to her suprise, that she and her cousin had been a week in the house together, and yet she had never ventured to mention Elsie's name to him, or ask a single question about what he had seen and done while he was in Oldbury. Ventured was the right word to use, for she did feel afraid of beginning on the subject to him. He did not seem at all disposed to open his heart to her now. "He was very much altered," she thought; "grown quite silent and formidable; working hard all day, and filling up the odds and ends of time with tiresome, unnecessary labours, as if for the express purpose of never having a minute's leisure for rest and talk with her."

The incessant bustle of occupation he kept up fretted her dreadfully. She had longed for him to come back, but now she began to wish he had stayed away altogether. Nothing could be so bad as to have him going about the house with that cold, hard look on his face, pretending to be wholly engrossed in business, talking mechanically about everyday matters when he felt obliged to speak at all, and never letting fall a single word, even to her, of what she knew he was thinking about every minute.

"Certainly," Cecil thought, "men have most uncomfortable ways of being unhappy." Even her father

could only show his sympathy by looking aggrieved, and making great haste to change the subject whenever any allusion to Elsie Blake, or to any of the incidents of her summer in Oldbury, came into their conversation. He *would* be more vexed that *she* should be troubled about her cousin's disappointment than concerned about the disappointment itself.

When he first kissed her on her return home, and gave one of his searching looks down into her eyes, Cecil shrank away from the scrutinising glance just for a moment, and felt, with an indescribable pang, that for the first time in all her life she did not wish her father to read quite all that her face might possibly tell him; not all the restlessness and pain in her heart, that made her feel as if she could have no peace till her cousin's attachment to Elsie Blake was approved, and the engagement allowed to go on. Her father would misunderstand her, she feared, if he knew how very strongly she felt about it. Yet when after that one long look he never showed any disposition to discuss the subject of her cousin's engagement with her, she grew impatient and almost indignant, as if he had in some way misjudged her. She longed to explain and plead and force him to see things exactly as she saw them, and to comprehend her feelings as she tried to explain them to herself.

Cecil had time to brood over such thoughts as these while she was being dressed for dinner one evening, when a large party of friends and relations were expected to a farewell entertainment at Sir Cecil's house. She sat passive in the hands of her maid, and her head drooped lower and lower as her thoughts went on, till she provoked an indignant remonstrance.

"Really, Miss, I sha'n't be able to make your hair fit to be seen if you won't hold your head steadier."

"Well, then, will that do?" said Cecil, stiffening her neck. "I wish you would be quick. Was it Papa who went into the drawing-room just now?"

"No, Miss, only Mr. Stephen. And, indeed, how am I to be quick when you move your head every minute and shake all the pins out as fast as I put them in, and don't seem to take any manner of interest in what I am doing to-night. Yet who knows whether this mayn't be the last evening party we shall ever dress for in our lives in a Christian land, Miss Cecil? Will you have the pearl necklace Sir Cecil gave you on your birthday, to wear with your pink silk dress, or the gold ornaments Mr. Stephen brought from Malta that you used to be so fond of?"

"I will wear Papa's necklace to-night. Make the best you can of me," said Cecil.

When the business of dressing was over, Cecil turned to the glass and rubbed her brown cheeks to bring a shade of colour into them.

"Yes, I shall do," she said; and a half smile passed over her face as she murmured to herself some lines from a poem of Browning's she had been reading:—

"Noon strikes—here sweeps the procession! our lady borne smiling and smart,
With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords stuck in her heart."

"That's how a good many people go to evening parties," she said. "Well, I'm ready for my part in the show."

It was early, and no one was in the drawing-room when she entered but her cousin Stephen, who was standing in one of the window recesses, staring stupidly

out at nothing into the deserted square garden. She went up to him almost timidly.

"You are not going to dine with us then?" she said, observing that he was not dressed for dinner.

"Yes, of course I am; why not? What else should I be going to do?"

"You are not ready; that's all I meant."

"I am going upstairs this instant."

"I wish you would not go; I want so to talk to you a little while."

"Well."

He turned his face towards her, but the expression on it did not encourage her to proceed; tears sprang to her eyes instead, and she was silent. His countenance changed at the sight of her emotion; he turned back to the window for a moment, and then came close to her.

"I can't help it, Cecil," he said, in a shaky voice. "It's a shame, I know; but you must forgive me. After all your goodness and sympathy I ought to treat you with more confidence, but I can't talk to you now; I dare not. Some day you will know, perhaps, that there are feelings that won't bear talking about, even to one's kindest friends."

"I know that now," said Cecil quickly. "I don't want you to say a word more than you like—not about feelings; only there is so much I am longing to know that you could tell me. I have not heard a word from Oldbury since I left, but just what comes in my uncle's letters, and you have been there. Surely you must have heard something about the Blakes while you were at home."

"Nothing but what I have told you already. Mrs. Blake died the very day after I got home, as you know. I could not intrude myself on them against their will at such a time. I wandered about the shut-up house day after day, but I never got so much as a glimpse of a face at a window. Cecil, you can't imagine what torture that week was to me. The horrible talk about them on every one's lips that I was forced to hear, and the impossibility of contradicting it, so as to do any good, and then my father's imploring looks at me whenever I went out. He watched me all that week as if his very life depended on what I was going to do, yet never said a word. I could not stand it. I came back here to wait for a while, till it was possible to take some step."

"And Elsie has not taken any notice of your letter yet?"

"No. I did speak to my father about that, and he assured me she had had it. It was difficult enough to question him; he is miserable, and takes refuge in ignoring the whole subject. There has never been over-much confidence between us, unfortunately, and about this, I find, we cannot talk. I suppose it's natural. He has only been treating me as I have treated you this week. He takes it for granted that I am going abroad with your father, and seems to consider that his consent to what he imagines to be my wish, in the choice of my profession, ought to bind me to relinquish the——other project altogether, —as if that were the whim of a month, to be just dropped and forgotten."

"He had rather let you go abroad for years, than consent to your engagement with poor Elsie."

"Yes, that's it—rather I went away than stayed to be a discredit to him in Oldbury."

"Steenie, I don't think you ought to speak so of your father. I wish you would not get bitter about it."

"I am trying hard not to be bitter. It is the old notion that he is letting himself be guided by other people's opinions, and the stupid gossip of that prejudiced little place, rather than by his own best feelings and judgment, that makes it so difficult for me to speak openly to him. If we could talk quite freely together, we should perhaps find that on some points we don't differ so much. I foresee all the difficulties and the misery this terrible discovery opens out before us as vividly as he can."

"Do you mean, then, that you are willing to give her up?"

"No, indeed I don't. She may very well give me up, though. To my mind that is the difficulty now; my case is altered since I spoke to her first. What can I offer her? Nothing but a long waiting, and the prospect of being disowned by my family at last. That's not what I would bring to any one I loved. She may well shrink from such a prospect."

"But she will not shrink."

"Not if she were left to herself—I know that well enough; but I know, too, she will not have strength to resist the influences that will be brought to bear on her. I saw her aunt, Miss Blake, on the morning after that terrible afternoon just before I left Oldbury, and we talked together for a few moments. She distrusts me, and is as much against us as my father can be."

"You could not make her believe that what she had told you the day before had not in the least changed——"

"No," interrupted Stephen; "because it had changed, not my feelings towards Elsie, but the way in which I looked on our engagement. It was a terrible revelation. Any man who cared for the honour of his family must have been stunned and broken down by having such a history disclosed to him. I could feel at the first moment that I could not endure to leave her to bear the burden of such a life as was before her alone; but I could not see very clearly how my part of the bearing was to be done. My love for her has never wavered—how should it?—but it does not blind me to the facts of the case."

"No," said Cecil rather bitterly, "men can't make sacrifices without being thoroughly aware of what they are doing, and that is what women can't understand."

"I said nothing about sacrifices," cried Stephen. "It is not a sacrifice, it is a necessity. I know I can't do anything else than stick to her. I love her too much, even if my word were not pledged, and whatever evil comes on her must come on me too. I don't make any pretence to generosity—not the least. If she had not been just what she is; if the thought of her suffering alone had been less intolerable and monstrous to me; if it had been anybody else——"

"Me, for instance," said Cecil, perversely courting the pain of the answer she knew she should get. "Such a strong-minded, resolute personage as I am, you would have thought strong enough to be left to battle against misfortune alone."

"It is impossible to imagine you in such a case. What is the use of putting it?" said Steenie, with a puzzled look.

"No use at all," Cecil hurried on; "it was nonsense. But, Steenie, I don't despair of your getting a letter from her yet. While her grandmother was dying she could not think of any one else, and it is only a fortnight since Mrs. Blake's funeral now. She may really not have been well enough to write to you. It will be a difficult task to answer your letter whenever she does it. She cannot engage herself to you while your father refuses his sanction; she can only promise to wait and trust you, and hope for better times."

"I know we must wait even for an engagement. The question I want to have answered is whether I go with you or stay in England. Our end might be attained quickest by my going away; and yet when I think of what may be before her—the changes, the need of protection she may have—I shrink from going. It would be something to be able to go down to Oldbury once or twice a year, and satisfy myself that she was safe there. Cecil, if you had seen her as I saw her last, all the life crushed out of her by that dreadful history she had overheard; lying like a broken flower—and I had to leave her so. They took possession of her, and would not let me stay to speak a word of comfort. Yet there is no one in the world cares for her but me; no one. I will never give her up!"

"But her aunt is a good woman!"

"Yes, indeed, good enough I should say to redeem

a whole family, whatever stain there might be on it, but she is capable of torturing my poor little darling to death. She will persuade her that it is her duty to give me up. She will work her into a frantic spirit of self-sacrifice. I shall be away, and the contrary influence will be brought to bear on her day after day. Her tender conscience will be tortured. I must see her, must have some sort of promise before I go. If there is no letter to-night, I have made up my mind to go down to Oldbury, and not leave this time till I have seen her, and had a thorough explanation with my father."

"And when you come back, you will know whether you sail with us or not. Papa will be terribly disappointed if you fail him at the last."

"Will he? It has occurred to me during the last few days that he was less anxious about my going. I have fancied once or twice that he had repented of having offered the private secretaryship to me."

"That's impossible, quite impossible!" cried Cecil vehemently. "You must not get such absurd notions into your head."

There was a pause, during which a very painful conjecture passed through Cecil's mind.

"How miserable it is to be in suspense!" she broke out impatiently. "Oh, how I wish something were settled! How long will you be in Oldbury?"

"You may be sure I don't like the suspense any better than you do; I am anxious enough to end it," Stephen said.

"How different things are from one's fancies of them," Cecil observed mournfully. "When we used

to wonder about the seclusion in which the Blakes lived, those first weeks when you and I talked about them so much in Oldbury, how little we thought——"

"Hush, don't go on," cried Stephen, turning quickly away from her to the window with a look of suffering in his face that made Cecil miserable.

Nothing pained him so much now as allusions to those gay-hearted, playful confidences; while, on the contrary, Cecil's thoughts were always flying back for relief to the thoughtless days when she had more or less shared her companion's feelings without exactly knowing to what result the excitement in which they were living was carrying them.

She was still longing to be able to say something to atone for the pain she had unconsciously given, when Steenie started from the window and crossed the room in two strides.

"Ah, the eight o'clock postman," Cecil said to herself as the well-known knock came. "He has rushed down to get the letters. We do have Oldbury letters at this time of day sometimes. That was what he was watching for when I came in. He is always looking out for her letter. I understand now how it is that the postman's knock always seems to go through him, and why he looks at every bundle of letters that comes in with such a dreadful hungry look. She might have answered before now—a whole month! However many terrible things had happened to me, if I had lost a hundred grandmothers, I would not have inflicted such a torture of suspense on any one—not on my greatest enemy. Suspense is torture; will he have the charity to think of mine? He is so long, he must be reading

a letter on the stairs; will he come back and tell me about it? I daresay not."

Stephen did, however, reappear at the drawing-room door for an instant.

"Only a letter from my father," he said, showing some closely written sheets which he had almost torn across in his eagerness to unfold them. "Only a long letter from my father with nothing whatever in it; that's all."

"Nothing whatever! that means only everything but *the* thing he cares about," Cecil said to herself as she retreated to the window. "I daresay the letter is full of anxious advice and affection. Well I must say it's a little hard on fathers and mothers and friends to have everything they say turned into nothing, unless it bears on the one absorbing interest that has crushed them out,—to have always to sympathise with that, or else be nothing."

A dark wet spot on the sheeny silk dress caught Cecil's eye and startled her; she passed her hands hastily over her eyes.

"Oh, what a goose I am! I must stop thinking. There is a double knock at the door. Well, I'm ready for them.

'Smiling and smart,
With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords stuck in her heart.'

I daresay I sha'n't be the only one in such a case to-night."

The evening passed off brilliantly, thanks to Cecil's exertions. Sir Cecil came back to the drawing-room, after taking the last party of guests to their carriage,

to express his content and to look after her. She was still standing on the hearth-rug where he had left her, gazing wearily at the flower vases in the grate. He put his arm round her, and stroked back her hair, looking down into her face. "Are you very tired, my darling?"

"Oh no, Papa," Cecil answered briskly; "not yet. I have not nearly done my day's work yet. Mrs. Cameron has been advising me about our outfit for the voyage from her own experience, and I mean to write out a list of all the things she tells me I ought to order before I go to bed."

"What busy, capable brains there must be under this silky stuff and these foolish ribbons!" said Sir Cecil, playing with her hair. "What a brave little soul it is altogether, getting through as much business as a Secretary of State in the day-time, and talking like—who shall I say?—not Madame de Staël exactly, but the next chatterin*gest* Frenchwoman, half the night."

"I suppose I inherit some of the 'fretful activity' —was not that the word?—which, in commenting on his appointment, the *Times* this morning attributes to Sir Cecil Russel, and which it fears will make him such a dangerous envoy for her Majesty to send to the far East."

"I may well be active in public business, when all management of my private concerns is taken out of my hands by my mite of a daughter. Stephen deserted us shamefully to-night—coming in in the middle of dinner, and sneaking away at the first opportunity."

"Papa," said Cecil, suddenly lifting up her head, "I used to think you the kindest and most just person in the world."

"Well, and now?" Sir Cecil asked, smiling.

Cecil drew a low easy chair forward, pushed her father down into it, and perched herself on his knee.

"We are going to talk it out, Papa. I'm not quite satisfied with you."

"Are you not? That's serious, and hard too, just when I am so well satisfied with you, and have consented, against the advice of all our prudent relations and friends, to drag you half over the world after me."

"Papa, please, don't lead away from what I want to talk about. It is so unlike you to be thinking so much of your own concerns, even at the busiest of times, that you can't acknowledge another person's unhappiness."

"I did not know I was in that amiable frame of mind at present."

"You are; you will make light of this trouble of Stephen's. You don't seem to think it a real serious misfortune."

"I think a very serious misfortune may be made out of it," Sir Cecil answered gravely. "My darling, it is hardly likely at our different ages, and with your utter lack of experience in life, that we should not take different views of such a matter. Can't you trust me without quite understanding what I am doing?"

"Oh yes! yes! If I were sure you were taking it seriously—if I thought you felt——"

"You feel too much," interrupted Sir Cecil. "Young people naturally exaggerate the importance of disappointments of this nature. They *may* be very much, I acknowledge; they *may* colour a whole life, or they

may be of very little consequence indeed after a month or two. Stéenie is young. He has never as yet had trouble of any kind to test his character. I don't suppose he has more stability than other people. To encourage him to rush into an engagement so thoroughly undesirable in every way, would, I think, be a great mistake. He may be very much in love—I daresay he is; but so much less capable is he of estimating the gravity of the circumstances of the case. I have no doubt the disappointment will seem very severe for a time, but it won't do him any harm, you need not be afraid. I think well enough of his character to believe that he will come out all the stronger for it."

"Papa, that is how I don't like to hear you talk," cried Cecil. "Oh, forgive me for saying it, but that is what I call unjust. You think of Steenie's character, and of how he is to get over it, but you quite forget her. You forget he has made her love him, and won her promise. You don't ask what effect it would have on her, to be cast off just because the person she loves does not think her worth braving trouble, and perhaps some loss of position and regard in the eyes of the world for. You may say what you like about Stephen's character coming out stronger for the disappointment, but I think the strength he would gain by turning away from a girl he loves, because she is unfortunate without fault of her own, would only be strength to do cruel and cowardly things. That's the sort of strength people get by trampling out love for worldly reasons. I had rather, caring as much for Steenie as you know I do, that he brought trouble on his life, and had to suffer even a great deal, than that he did what I should have to despise him for."

Sir Cecil looked up surprised into his daughter's face, and then mused for some time silently. "There is a great deal in what you say," he resumed at last; "but you are only looking at one side. Stephen has duties to other people as well as to this girl. He is an only son, and he owes a great deal to his family and to his name. It does not belong to him alone. His father and his friends may well object to his connecting it with one so terribly disgraced. There is an inheritance of shame, as well as of honour; a thoughtful man ought to shrink from entering into it. Then as to your friend, the young lady herself, I don't forget her so completely as you suppose; even for her, I am of opinion that the present pain is the least evil. Youth is not all of life, remember. There is a long, long time to come after its vehement passions are over. And I doubt whether any early disappointment could entail such long suffering as would come upon a woman who felt that she had brought discord into her husband's family, and injured his prospects in life, when once she perceived that he had begun to regret the sacrifices he had made for her sake. Can't you believe that it might be better for your friend to bear her trial alone, than to see the shadow of her father's guilt fall on those she loves best?"

"I think I might feel so, but Elsie Blake—it is cruel to think of her having to suffer alone. If you had seen her, you would understand. Think what her life will be. It would be easy for me to bear to have any hope I clung to snatched away, because whatever were to happen to me, I should always have had you; but all her life she has had worse than no father. I feel she ought to have some one;—there is nothing I

would not do to give her some one to help her and love her, when I think of that."

Cecil knew her father did not like the sight of tears, and she paused and struggled hard to send back the moisture that all but overflowed her eyes. Sir Cecil hastily drew her hand across his own.

"You are an eloquent pleader; but how you are trembling, my poor little one. I think we have had as much of this talk as is good for us. I do not see that there is anything for me to do; I can't recall the advice I have given, and Steenie must not marry without his father's consent."

"No, but if you approved—my uncle is so easily persuaded by you—he might consent to their being married even now; and if they were to leave England directly with us, all the discomfort of Oldbury censure and gossip would be avoided. When we all came back again, Elsie would have been his wife so long, everything else would be forgotten."

"I don't think so; and I am not prepared to take such a responsibility on myself. I could not think of interfering to bring about this marriage, and besides, I should require to know a girl very thoroughly, and think well of her family too, before I consented to bring her into such close intimacy with you as the plan you propose would necessitate."

"Papa, listen," said Cecil, suddenly throwing her arms round his neck; "I will tell you what I would do rather than be a hindrance to their happiness—I would give you up to her. Yes, she is so good and beautiful and gentle, you would get to love her like a daughter very soon, and she would wait on you

almost as well as I could. She shall go with you and Stephen, and I will stay here in this house with Grandmamma all the years you are away, and wait for you to come back again. I would be very patient; I would listen to all the stories——"

"Yes, I daresay. And how much of you should I find when I came back again after such a course of discipline; my poor little self-elected Iphigenia? No, no, I'm not disposed to be sacrificed on this fine altar of friendship, if you are. I won't have an unknown tall daughter thrust upon me instead of my own little one, to whose absurdities I am, at all events, accustomed. It's an impracticable scheme, Cecil; but after all, if your friend is worth as much as you think, and if Stephen's attachment to her has sufficient stability in it, their case is not altogether desperate. They can be faithful to each other without vows. Let Steenie come out to China with us; it is the best thing he can do for himself every way. When we all return, six or seven years hence, he will find Oldbury looking very much as it does now. In that sleepy, comfortable place six years or so won't have made much difference in any one. If he chooses then to go up to that gloomy little house on the hill to look for a wife, and finds Miss Elsie Blake waiting for him, their attachment would have a different sort of look about it, and might deserve greater consideration than it gets now. No one then would have a right to interfere."

"May I tell him you say so?" asked Cecil.

"I had rather you said nothing about it. He would turn it into greater encouragement than it is meant for; and unless his attachment can survive all man-

ner of discouragement, it had much better die. Now don't think any more to-night. Go to bed, and come down without those black rings round your eyes to-morrow."

CHAPTER XI.

Miss Berry's Promise.

CECIL calculated on her cousin's remaining at least a week in Oldbury, and was somewhat disappointed when, on the fourth morning of his absence, her father received a letter from Mr. Pierrepoint announcing his intention of coming up to London that day with his son, and remaining in Eaton Square till the time fixed for their departure from England arrived. Cecil got up and looked at the note over her father's shoulder.

"It appears to be quite settled then," she observed, "that Steenie is to sail with us."

"Yes; I always knew he would," answered Sir Cecil quietly.

There was something in the tone of the remark that rather disconcerted Cecil. It sounded like, "I always knew he would not forego so manifest an advantage for any romantic folly." She could not give her mind to her business quite as well as usual that morning. She wandered vaguely about the house longing for Steenie to appear, that she might hear his own justification of his decision.

He and his father did not arrive till late in the afternoon, and Cecil had to give her undivided attention to her uncle for the first hour, while he sat with her in the drawing-room before dinner talking over the arrangements for the voyage, and getting from her

many little particulars about their plans, which his son seemed to have forgotten to communicate.

While Cecil answered his questions and stole a studying glance every now and then into Steenie's grave face, she came to the conclusion that she should probably have to do without the explanation of her cousin's change of purpose she had been looking for all day.

Some words her father had said to her had seemed, when she came to think them over, like warnings not to take too much on herself, and she had made up her mind to be prudent, and not put herself in the way of saying more than she ought.

It was a relief, however, when, as she was following her uncle from the drawing-room, Steenie called her back.

"Can't you spare me five minutes?"

"You know I can."

"Well, it is all over; they have left Oldbury."

"Left Oldbury! But where have they gone."

"That is what no one seems to know. Yet even that is not the worst. My father saw them the evening before they left—Miss Blake and Elsie. He was kinder to me than I should have expected; he asked for a message for me. She was there; she might surely have sent some word—some acknowledgment of my letter."

"And she did not?"

"No; Miss Blake in her presence gave a message; something about hoping that no recollections of them would interfere with my future happiness. I cannot tell what it meant. My letter deserved a different acknowledgment from that. She should not have let

that be said to me for answer to what I had written to her."

"Then you think there will never be any other answer?"

"If my father had not met them by chance, I should not have heard so much as this. They took leave of no one. They seem to have designed to vanish from the place without leaving a trace. If he had not seen them, I should have gone up to the house to find it empty. Not a word—and I have been waiting patiently to know her wishes all this time!"

"Did she know you were leaving England immediately?"

"I had told her it was for her to decide, and that, whether I went or stayed, all I did would still be for her. Well, it is clear they won't trust me. The long uncertainty would, I suppose, have been worse to her than giving it up altogether. Unhappy and forlorn as they are, the miserable pretence of support I offered was not worth accepting."

"I think she would have written to you if she dared. You don't blame her?"

"No, only for letting herself be overruled, and not giving me a chance of seeing her again. I ought to have had that, or some word from her. To have her slide away from me in this silent fashion is the hardest of all ways of losing her. But there, Cecil, I have told you all there is to tell. Now it is over, we won't speak about it again. You must not think me ungrateful for all your sympathy because I can't talk."

"No, of course not. *I* shall think of *her* all the same, even if I never speak her name again."

"Thank you; God bless you for that! You are the kindest, best sympathiser a man ever had."

Steenie stooped down and kissed her forehead as he finished speaking, and Cecil turned away and ran out of the room.

Was it all over then? Would Elsie's name never be mentioned between them again, and all that happy Oldbury summer become indeed a recollection to be struggled against and blotted out?

There was very little time for talk of any kind, during the busy bewildering days that followed. Stephen worked harder than any one, and the few hours he had to spare were given to his father. Lady Selina claimed a good deal of Cecil's attention; and as the day that was to separate her from her grandmother drew near, she discovered that even the old stories about the Russels being so small and brown had a sort of charm about them, as savouring of old home ties, that made the prospect of coming definitely to the last time of hearing more painful than she had anticipated.

She did not get as much sympathy from her father and Steenie in her regret at parting from all the inanimate objects of the old home as she would have liked. Sir Cecil had been too great a traveller to have very keen local attachments; and when she called on Stephen to join in mournful recollections of "that first time when we managed to drag the big illustrated Shakespeare from the bookshelf," or "the day when we painted our first picture on the rosewood easel," she generally met a pre-occupied look,

or was put off with a hasty answer that checked her communications. These were not the recollections he was clinging to, she perceived. Something else was absorbing all his regrets. She must be content to take her farewell of the old life alone.

Just at the last, however, in the supreme moment of parting from the old scenes, she and her cousin had one more conversation, in which Elsie's name was once more freely spoken between them.

Stephen was absent the whole of the last day they were to be in London; and when he returned very late at night, Cecil happened to be the only member of the family still up. The others had gone to bed thoroughly overcome with fatigue, and she had been making the most of the solitary hours, first to make up parcels of her old childish treasures to leave behind for some poor children she was interested in, and then to write a long farewell epistle to Miss Berry.

Stephen entered the drawing-room as she was folding her letter. He had a nosegay of scented geranium leaves and balsam flowers in his hand, which he came and gave to her.

"I am glad you are up still," he said; "I promised to give you these flowers. You know where they come from, don't you?"

"Miss Berry's window-sill! Yes, yes, how well I know exactly where the flower-pots stand! I knew all day where you were, but your father has been quite in a state of mind about you, half fearing that you had disappeared mysteriously, and would never be heard of more."

"You knew I was not so easily got rid of."

"I knew you would go to see the old place again."

"Don't let me interrupt your letter. Is it not very late for you to be sitting up?"

"I had finished. I have been writing to Miss Berry, and now I will put in a postscript to thank her for the flowers."

And Cecil lingered longer than necessary over her last sentence, feeling quite sure that her cousin would soon tell her more.

"It was not the old place I saw, Cecil," he said, after a few moment's silence. "I am glad I went and found that out. I shall go away freer, and be in less danger of being seized with a frantic *mal de pays*, such as dragged me back to Oldbury last spring. You have no notion how empty and meaningless it all looked to-day—a mere dead shell. What do I care for it? She was the whole place to me. I know that now, and I believe it has been so for years. I shall have no painful longings to get back to Oldbury for the future. That is all over since I have seen it again."

"Poor Oldbury!" said Cecil, rather bitterly. "Did you see any one besides Miss Berry?"

"I walked about the whole day, and went everywhere —up into the hills, and to all our old haunts by the river, feeling all the time as one might feel in walking about a church-yard. When it began to grow dark I turned into Miss Berry's house, and stayed till I had to run off to catch the last train. We had a good deal of talk. She thawed out of the strange frightened silence she has kept up with us lately, and spoke of the Blakes. Cecil, you deserve to see it, you care so much for her—there, read,—it is a note from her to

Miss Berry that I made poor Elderberry give up to me just as I was going away."

He opened the tear-blistered sheet on which Elsie had scrawled her good-bye, and held it before Cecil's eyes, but he would not let it out of his hand while she read.

Cecil's face was wet with tears, and it was some minutes before she could speak when she had come to the end of the blotted page.

"It is enough to break one's heart," she said.

"It has comforted mine," Steenie answered. "It is a bit of herself. Every word of the note is like her. Poor child! how she suffered when she wrote it. See the blots on the paper! It shows what I think of your love for her, Cecil, that I let you look at them. Her silence, and what I chose to think her hardness towards me, had confused my thoughts of her, and now I have found her again. It is not her own will that has divided us, and nothing else shall. I don't leave England altogether so hopeless as I thought I should yesterday. Miss Berry has promised to follow up any opening for communication with her that may arise, and she will let me hear of her. Imagine having to depend for news of what one cares most about in the world on such letters as poor dear Elderberry's are sure to be. Yet even for that prospect of hearing of her I am immensely thankful."

"I have been writing to Miss Berry to-night to explain how she is to communicate with us. She is sure to hear some news of the Blakes before long; and I have a strong presentiment that her rambling letters will prove the most interesting we shall receive from England—the ones we shall look out for most

eagerly. There—that is my last letter written on the dear old Davenport Papa gave me when I was ten years old."

"Are you leaving your geraniums and balsams behind you?"

"No, I am dividing them to give you half. I wonder who will keep their share the longest?"

"I shall, of course! Not that I understand your love of relics, or that I shall ever want anything to recall Elderberry's little old room, the most home-like place I have ever known in my life. It can't be anything to you in comparison."

"Perhaps not. I hear Papa opening the door of his bedroom. He is wondering what keeps me up so very late; and indeed I ought to go, for our last English day is an hour old already."

CHAPTER XII.

Winter Rain.

MRS. NEALE lived in a tall, dark, old-fashioned house, in a quiet street opening on to one of the West-end squares; and Elsie's first view of her new abode, when she, her grandfather, and Margaret drove up to it on the afternoon of the day on which they had left Oldbury, was anything but a cheering one. It was a heavy sunless November afternoon. The West-end streets and squares had their dreariest deserted autumnal look. She glanced up and down long vistas of shut-up houses, all alike grim and lifeless looking, and remembered with a sort of remorse how, when she was a child, she used to envy Margaret her half-yearly journey to London. And this was what a journey was, and here where it ended.

The inside of Mrs. Neale's house was not more prepossessing than the outside. It had been a handsome abode in its day. The rooms were filled with what had once been costly furniture and ornaments, in the taste of a bygone time, which now had an indescribable air of neglect and decay about them.

Elsie was surprised to see Margaret wandering from room to room with a look of interest softening her face, such as had never come upon it for anything in Oldbury. Both to her and old Mr. Blake the scenes they had returned to were more congenial and home-

like than those they had left. The ghost of Margaret's youth looked at her from the faded pictures and dust-laden, dreary decorations of the rooms; and objects in which Elsie could only see a worse sort of squalor than any cottage in Oldbury would have shown, had a halo of interest from associations with past times for her. They did not see anything of Mrs. Neale on the evening of their arrival. Elsie had to wait till the middle of the next day for an introduction to her grandmother, whom she began rather to dread seeing. Margaret warned her before she took her into Mrs. Neale's room, that she must not show any emotion when her grandmother spoke to her first. She must be quite composed, and meet her in a commonplace way, as if she had always been in the habit of seeing her every day.

"Mrs. Neale was not precisely an invalid," Margaret said; "but she was a person who had always dreaded excitement of a painful nature. Yet she had been a good friend to them—a faithful friend; and they owed her all the more gratitude for persevering in seeing them, because her inclination would have led her to avoid the painful thoughts that their presence must bring."

Elsie pictured to herself a cold, apathetic personage, from whom she feared she should always shrink away; and she could hardly summon courage to follow Margaret into the little upstairs boudoir where Mrs. Neale sat. Her first glance round the room caused her an agreeable surprise. It was a pretty room, bright and carefully kept, very unlike all the other parts of the house she had previously seen. There were vases of cut flowers on the table, a small

cheerful fire in the grate, a stand holding a work-basket, and a pile of library books drawn conveniently near an arm-chair, from which rose a tall, graceful lady, much younger-looking than Elsie had expected, and with traces of great beauty on her face. She held out both hands, drew Elsie towards her, and gave her a quick kiss on each cheek.

"So this is little Alice," she said, in a tone of rather forced cheerfulness. Then dropping Elsie's hands, she sank into her chair as hastily as she had risen, leaned back, and shut her eyes.

"Yes," she said, after a moment's silence, during which Margaret had approached her chair rather anxiously; "there is certainly more likeness than from your description I was prepared to see, but I don't mean to allow myself to be overcome. I will see her for a few minutes every day till I get accustomed to it."

She made several remarks on indifferent subjects to Margaret before she turned to Elsie again, and then surprised her by beginning to question her on her pursuits and accomplishments.

"Of course she has never seen any one in her life," Mrs. Neale said, turning to Margaret, when Elsie had made a hesitating answer or two. "How could she in Oldbury, or indeed, unhappily, how could we show her to anybody anywhere? Poor child! one almost wishes she had been plain—it would have been less tantalizing; for what use can beauty or advantages of any kind ever be to her?"

Margaret made no answer, and Mrs. Neale, taking up a book from the stand, observed, "There, my dear, I think that will do for the present. You had per-

haps better go now. It only wants half an hour to my dinner-time; and I am always obliged to be perfectly silent and quiet before and after eating. I will see Alice—or Elsie I think you call her—again for a quarter of an hour in the afternoon; and by and by perhaps I may be able to let her read aloud to me. She looks as if she would read well."

Elsie received two more hasty kisses, and Mrs. Neale looked approvingly at her as she moved towards the door.

"She really is a sweetly pretty creature," she said aside to Margaret; "but have you not put her into very coarse, heavy mourning? Has she nothing else she can wear while she is here?"

"Nothing different from what you have seen," Margaret answered. "You know my scruples. I cannot bear to spend more than is absolutely necessary on ourselves, while——"

"Yes, yes; but you carry the principle a great deal too far. I have never gone along with you. However, we will not dispute the point. Alice has always been your charge since her poor mother's death, and of course I shall not begin to interfere now."

Elsie looked up at Margaret as they left the room together.

"I don't think I can ever call her grandmother," she said in a low voice. "How different she is!"

"Yes," Margaret answered; "but we will not judge her. She has never failed in substantial kindness since our misfortunes, as many whom we once esteemed close friends have done. She was a prosperous, admired, successful woman, living much in the gay world, till the blow came that cut her off from all her old

pleasures at once. She could never bear to face her old companions after her son-in-law's disgrace. She has shut herself up in that room, and tried to hedge herself in from painful thoughts, and from absolutely seeing and feeling the change in her position. It is not by any means a good way of bearing the trial, but perhaps it is the only one she has strength for. Your poor mother died."

"Took that way of slipping out of the trouble, and evading her share," Margaret's words almost seemed to imply.

"Was not that the worst part of the trial to Mrs. Neale? Did she not love Mamma very much?" Elsie asked.

"She was very proud of her beauty; but your mother married young: she and Mrs. Neale both lived very much for society, and necessarily saw but little of each other. Mrs. Neale's chief affection has always been given to her son Gilbert."

"The one who is alive still?" asked Elsie.

"Yes," said Margaret; "but we shall not see him. He will certainly not come near the house while we are staying here."

After that first visit Elsie spent an hour or so each day in Mrs. Neale's room. She received the same quick kisses—two at coming and two at going, never more nor less—and meanwhile was questioned on such ordinary topics as a visitor might be entertained with, or set to read one of the circulating library novels, of which Mrs. Neale always had a large supply in hand. Now and then Mrs. Neale would interrupt the reading to open out to Elsie on some recollection of her past life. For the first day or two

Elsie listened breathlessly, expecting some mention of her father or her mother, which would make her feel more familiar with them, but nothing of the kind ever came. It was an account of some *fête* at which Mrs. Neale had assisted years before, or a lively description of some celebrity to whom she had been introduced, and who had admired her, with which her grandmother entertained her. Occasionally she would wind up with a lamentation that Elsie would never know anything of similar pleasures—that the world of fashionable society in which her grandmother and mother had shone such conspicuous stars was definitely closed to her. There was anger as well as pity in Mrs. Neale's bright eyes whenever a few words of this kind passed her lips. She looked almost grudgingly at Elsie's lovely face, as if this were another good thing of which the enjoyment had been cruelly snatched away from her.

These glimpses at Mrs. Neale's past experiences were as great a contrast to the subjects that usually occupied Elsie's thoughts, as the bright room in which the hostess lived was to all the other parts of the house. During the many hours when she was not with her grandmother, Elsie wandered about the neglected, silent rooms, where footsteps and voices were seldom heard from year's end to year's end. She lifted the lids of inlaid work-boxes, and looked down into quaint, costly vases, round which sickly odours of long since evaporated perfumes lingered, and tried to fancy how they had looked in past times, and speculated what other faces had bent near, and what other hands had touched them.

The life lived in these rooms, when they had been

constantly occupied, had not been one that had left any personal or home-like relic behind. It was the flavour of past gaieties and of suddenly-interrupted amusements that lingered about the place, and gave it its indescribable air of gloom. It was to escape from this that Mrs. Neale had shut herself up in her retreat. Elsie meditated a great deal on the difference between Mrs. Neale's way of taking her trial and Margaret's, and decided within herself that, after all, the solemn acceptance of sorrow as the appointed lot of their lives, which had given its character to the Oldbury home, was preferable to the ineffectual struggle to keep thought at bay, which made the ghastly contrasts of the life here. She observed with some surprise that, in spite of their utter unlikeness of character, there was a strong bond of mutual affection between Margaret and Mrs. Neale. Little disposed as Margaret was to tolerate weakness or self-indulgence, she was always ready to make excuses for Mrs. Neale's faults; and when she spoke to her, or performed any little personal service for her, there would come a faint flush of colour, and a softening of all the lines of her handsome, clear cut face that for a moment or two restored something of the glow and charm of youth to her countenance.

Elsie pondered much in her solitary hours over these revelations of Margaret's inner life. Would her life, she asked herself, be like this one whose secrets she was divining at last? Could she go on living after the love, which now seemed the one absorbing interest of her existence, had been quite put aside, and allowed to live as a faint remembrance only? Would she, years hence, return to some house, where

the ghost of her love would look out upon her as the ghost of Margaret's did in this?

Once, about a week after she came to London, Elsie passed down Eaton-square when she was out walking with Crawford, and observed a carriage stop at a door, from which a young lady alighted, ran quickly up the steps, and passed into the house.

"That's Sir Cecil Russel's house, and the young lady who ran in is Miss Russel, who was down in Oldbury so long. Did you see her?" Crawford asked.

Elsie had recognised Cecil at the very first glimpse; and when she disappeared she stood still, staring blankly at the closed door, and could hardly bring herself to move on, even when Crawford called her.

This incident did not by any means add to Elsie's comfort. After that day she always had a feverish, restless longing for the hour to come at which Margaret was accustomed to send her out for a daily walk with Crawford. If it rained, or if Crawford was busy and could not go out with her, she was more unhappy than usual the whole day. When she did get out, all her thoughts were absorbed in the one hope that Crawford's errands would lead her to take the way she wanted to go. She seldom had courage herself to propose that they should walk down Eaton-square; but if they did pass Sir Cecil's house, she felt as if the object of the walk had been attained. She had glanced up at the windows, and seen a curtain flutter; or a footman passed up the doorsteps and gave in a letter while she was by; or at the very least she had breathed a whiff of perfume from the geraniums and mignonette in Cecil's balcony. She went

home satisfied—a sort of link between herself and the inhabitants of that house had to her fancy been woven; and the rest of the day passed in comparative content.

At last a morning came—a chill December morning—when she went out, after having been confined to the house by nearly a fortnight's rain, and looking up at Sir Cecil's house saw signs that made her heart die within her. The windows and doors were wide open; work-people were passing in and out. A van laden with furniture stood at the door. Elsie entreated Crawford to stop and ask what it meant. The careless surprised answers brought no comfort.

Yes, this house did once belong to Sir Cecil Russel, but he had gone abroad for several years, and now the house was let again, and another family were coming immediately to live in it.

All Elsie's eagerness to walk out disappeared after that day, and she relapsed into a state of listlessness and depression that greatly distressed and puzzled Margaret.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Reft in the Cloud.

In the beginning of the next year Margaret went to Dartmoor to pay her last visit to the prisoner there, who was to be released in the coming spring. She went quite alone. Since his wife's death Mr. Blake had been gradually sinking into a state of apathy, from which he could not be roused to undertake the journey. When Margaret spoke of it to him, he listened attentively for a time, a look of sorrowful intelligence would come on his face, and he seemed to struggle to call together his wandering thoughts, and brace himself for some effort he had to make. But the instant she ceased to speak, the impression of her words passed away, the blank look settled on his face again, and he would begin to mutter the words of a problem or a passage from some book to himself. After a time, Margaret left off urging him to come with her, for she thought that the sight of him in his present state would be a greater pain to his son than even the disappointment of seeing her standing for the first time alone at the prison-grate where so many sad interviews had already taken place.

Elsie made a frightened, half-shrinking offer to accompany her aunt to Dartmoor; but Margaret, though pleased that she should show even a slight desire to see her father, thought it better not to take her. The

expression of the wish, however, opened her heart to talk to Elsie about her father more freely than she had ever done before. She did not in any degree attempt to excuse his crime, but she spoke of his deep penitence, and dwelt much on the love for his little daughter, which alone of all his previous interests had survived the numbing effects of much solitude and excessive manual labour.

The day before Margaret set out on her expedition, she read aloud to Elsie all the letters that her father had written since his imprisonment. With the exception of the passages in them that referred to herself, they sounded to Elsie somewhat meagre and cold. Margaret pointed out a spot here and there where the paper was still crisp and blistered with the tears that had fallen on it when the letter had been first read; but the few words of bitter self-accusation that had called forth these tears did not move Elsie as they had moved those to whom they were addressed long ago. The suffering she had herself endured was too strong in her mind for any expression of remorse for the sin that had caused it to seem quite adequate. She sat dry-eyed while Margaret read, angry with herself for feeling so hard and cold, and for being able to see nothing but the dark chasm dividing her from all natural joy and communion with her fellows, which this man's crimes had rent. How was it that Margaret felt so differently? How had she learned to merge all thought of her own loss in such supreme pity for the guilty one, that the necessity of sharing his punishment seemed a privilege of kinship instead of an unjust doom?

Margaret was to spend a night with a friend at

Southampton, and had to be absent the greater part of two days. It was a trying time to Elsie, but it did her good. The necessity of occupying herself incessantly in attendance on her grandfather, who missed Margaret very much, broke the habit of brooding over her own griefs to which she had been yielding; and when she had an instant's leisure, her thoughts, instead of reverting to their usual train, followed Margaret on her journey, and occupied themselves in picturing the scene in the prison, when Margaret and her father would undergo the last of their many constrained, painful meetings—face to face, but with bars between them, and no touch, not even a clasp of the hand possible. What would be said? What questions would be asked? Her name would come into their talk there, where she shuddered to think of its having been spoken so often. And then Elsie tried hard to turn her thoughts quite from herself, and call up the marred, miserable, labour-worn face, from whose lips, as Margaret had told her, her name so often came. She made herself look at it, tried to see the love for her written on it, and would not let any vision of Steenie's face, with another kind of love for her in his eyes, float up and thrust her father's away. No; this sad face was hers to love, not the other bright one. She must take this into her heart and thoughts, and let the other go. If she could but do it less grudgingly; if only the contrast would not look so terribly great, so hard to grow accustomed to!

There was an evening service at a church close to Mrs. Neale's house, which Margaret and Elsie were in the frequent habit of attending; and on the first day of Margaret's absence, Elsie, leaving Mr. Blake asleep in

his chair, ventured to slip away for the short hour the service lasted. She felt it would be a help to her to bring the struggle she was carrying on within herself into the still atmosphere of the church, within hearing of mingled voices murmuring prayers for help, into the presence of bowed heads, some of which might be weighed down with grief as heavy as her own. She expected to receive comfort, but she found a greater deliverance than she had looked for. A stranger to her read the service. The words of the prayers seemed to have a new meaning to Elsie from the trembling earnestness with which they were spoken; but she did not look up till the Creed was read. "I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Holy Catholic Church, The Communion of Saints, The Forgiveness of Sins." The solemn triumph of the tone in which the last sentence was uttered brought the words into Elsie's heart with a start of wonder that she had never rightly felt their meaning before. She lifted up her head and caught a look on the speaker's face, in his far-seeing eyes, in his strong, compassionate, sorrowful mouth, which intensified the impression the words had made upon her. "The Forgiveness of Sins." The belief he was stating was clearly more to him than a joyful, comfortable assurance of personal pardon merely. In speaking the words he seemed to be taking upon him a great weight of obligation—to forgive while being forgiven, to shrink from no partnership in suffering, from no toil and struggle to undo the effects of others' sin which perfect forgiveness includes. Elsie knelt down at the next prayer with a new thought in her mind; an illumination had fallen on her difficult path which made it no longer seem so very hard to tread.

The sermon that followed made the dawning thought grow each moment clearer. It was on the divine humanity of Christ, and the unity of the race under His headship. As Elsie listened, the bitter sense of injustice in her lot which had been troubling her for many months, quite passed away. It began no longer to seem so dark and horrible a thing to be condemned to share the punishment of another's guilt. She learned that this was the privilege, the meaning of kinship, the condition of union with the Head, who had suffered for all. The mystery of pain, of the innocent suffering with the guilty, became a little clearer. She felt she was no longer alone. Her pain seemed useless, meaningless no longer. There was One bearing it with her, knitting her to Himself and to all her fellows in the great divine and human task of endurance, of bringing good from evil, of sorrowing and suffering with and for all.

Elsie went home with a peace and calm in her heart she had never known before. The hardness she had wondered at and lamented over in herself disappeared now that she had accepted sacrifice as the Divine law of life. She discovered that she had been harsh and unforgiving—not from indignation against sin, but from a grudge in her heart at having to share in its punishment. The thought of the Perfect Son of Man choosing to suffer with those He saved softened her, while it gave her fresh courage to endure her own share of pain.

Margaret returned home the next day, and Elsie received her with an affectionate warmth of welcome, which showed Margaret at once that a happy change

had come over her spirit, and that the dark apathy of self-involved grief was at length shaken off.

As they talked long together that evening, and Elsie, instead of shrinking from the subject, showed an earnest desire to learn all she could about her father, that she might prepare herself to be to him what he hoped to find her, Margaret felt for the first time in many many years that she had a companion in the task of bearing the family burdens—some one near her who could give her support and comfort in return for what she was always giving. Elsie would have been well repaid for her efforts if she had known the rest that this discovery brought to Margaret's weary heart.

The last few months had been more painful to Margaret than all the previous years of her long trial. The return to old haunts and habits, if it had brought interest and excitement, had also brought a renewal of vivid pain such as she had believed she could never feel again, and that last interview with her brother, once looked forward to as a joyful epoch, had proved more depressing than any she had experienced hitherto. She had been shocked at the change the last half-year had made in her brother's health and appearance. Since the news of the shortening of the term of his imprisonment had been imparted to him, he had been seized with a fever of impatience for the hour of release to come, which was wearing him down more rapidly than the labour and suffering of the years when release had seemed too distant to be worth hoping for. Margaret confessed to Elsie that she wished now she had consented to her request and taken her to Dartmoor. Her father seemed to have

laid aside his once absorbing desire to conceal his guilt from his only child, and to be possessed only by a terror lest he should after all never enjoy the sight his eyes craved.

As the hour of his discharge drew near, it was each day more and more impossible to him to believe that he should live till it came.

To Margaret also the months that had to be worn through before the dreaded, wished-for day arrived, looked terribly long. She did not know how she could have borne them if Elsie had not just then changed from being an anxious charge into a sympathising helper.

In the course of the winter, Margaret, her father, and Elsie left Mrs. Neale's house and went into lodgings in a neighbouring street. Gilbert Neale was coming to spend some weeks with his mother, and they wished to be settled in a home of their own before he arrived. While he remained in London, Elsie went twice every day, at stated times, to see her grandmother, but Margaret never accompanied her on these visits. Her uncle used to come into Mrs. Neale's boudoir while she was there, and would often sit watching her for a long time together, with a softened, sorrowful expression on his stern face; but he spoke little to her, and they did not make much advance towards acquaintanceship. She, on her part, had a shrinking from him. She could not forget, even in her softened mood, that he had interfered (it might be rightly, she could not judge of that) to separate her from Stephen Pierrepoint.

One day when they chanced to be going down

the staircase together, he startled her by a sudden question:

"Do you ever hear anything of young Pierrepoint now?" he said abruptly.

"No," Elsie answered, with a look of appeal against the cruelty of the question in her eyes.

"Well, well, I did not mean to vex you, but it was right that I should know. He has been kind to my nephew, and I should have been very sorry if he had been brought into any trouble through a connexion of mine. For your sake, as well as his, it is best that there should be nothing between you. Whatever you think about it at present, you may take my word that I am right."

Elsie hurried away, without attempting an answer. She did not want him to see the tears of indignation and pain that would force themselves into her eyes, and she could not trust herself to speak.

Nothing further ever passed between them on the subject; but those few words were enough to revive a good deal of the bitter feeling Elsie hoped she had succeeded in putting quite away from her.

Did people who had crushed out their own loves (for sufficient reasons, perhaps) necessarily grow as harsh and cold as this uncle of hers seemed to be? She wondered often what he and Margaret had been like in their happy days. It interested her to observe that there was a certain resemblance between them now, for she thought it showed that, far apart as their outward lives had been, there had remained a link of sympathy between them. Each in thought and recollection had been living unconsciously with the other. They had suffered together, and grown as much alike

in their utter separation as constant intercourse might have made them.

Before Mr. Neale left London he called once at the Blakes' lodgings, and had an interview with Margaret and Elsie. It was merely on matters of business he came to speak to them. He was Elsie's trustee, and had the management of some property she would inherit from her mother; and now that her father was likely to return home, he thought it necessary to make some fresh arrangements which he wished to explain to them.

It was to Mr. Blake nominally that the explanations were offered; but as it was found impossible to fix his attention for more than a minute at a time on anything that was being said, Margaret had to act for him, and take the chief part in a discussion of future plans which grew out of the statements Mr. Neale laid before her.

Elsie sat silently by Margaret's side, listening and wondering. All day she had been the more agitated of the two at the prospect of this meeting, and now it was she, and not Margaret, whose mind was in a tumult, and whose thoughts refused to fix themselves on the everyday business details that had to be discussed.

Would the time ever come, she wondered fearfully, when she and Stephen would meet, after years and years of separation, and touch hands coldly, and sit opposite each other at a table, and talk in quiet, measured tones of deeds and money and places of abode, and ways and means of living; like strangers, or indifferent acquaintances? No; very very unlike either, Elsie acknowledged to herself.

Two strangers or two indifferent acquaintances could hardly have gone on talking so long without there coming to one or the other—some little relaxation of the face from its studied quietness, some touch of feeling into a tone of voice, some little look or chance word that made an approach to cordiality. There must be a great deal of strong feeling underneath to need such careful guarding. If something should startle them into being themselves for a moment? If Margaret's voice were to change? If she were to glance up from her slow reading aloud to her father of the letter Mr. Neale had put into her hands, and meet the look in the deep-set grey eyes opposite her, which Elsie perceived were studying her face by stealth, learning it jealously by heart, as she read, what would happen then? Elsie felt oppressed, as if she could hardly breathe in the oppressive atmosphere of choked-up emotion she was in.

At length it was over: the last paper signed, the last explanation given. Margaret rose from her seat as soon as the business was concluded, as if to intimate that the interview must end there; Mr. Neale seemed disposed to linger a few moments longer, but there was nothing in Margaret's face to encourage him to enter on any fresh topic of discourse. She stood quiet and cold, looking towards him steadily, with eyes from which all expression seemed to have been purposely withdrawn, as she awaited his farewell. Then he shook hands with them all silently, and left the room.

Margaret drew a long sigh as the door closed behind him.

"It is over," she said, with the slight tremor in her

voice which Elsie had been listening for all the morning. "It is over. We have taken the first necessary step towards inaugurating the new life we are all to begin when your father comes back to us, and now we have only to enter upon it thankfully."

CHAPTER XIV.

Release.

ELSIE had believed herself almost indifferent about the plans for the future which Margaret had discussed with Mr. Neale; but when she found it was definitely arranged that the whole family were to emigrate to America as soon as her father was set at liberty, and that they were to sail early in the spring, she was more dismayed at the prospect than she had expected to be.

Leaving England, she discovered, meant to her getting further and further away from Oldbury, and putting herself quite beyond the possibility of happy chances arising that might take her in the way of hearing old friends' names, or regaining some link of associations with the places that were dear to her. She did not hate London quite so much now as she had done at first; and when she compared it with the far off American city to which they were bound, she began to love it dearly. Once she had seen Mr. Pierrepoint's name in a printed announcement of a charity sermon he was to preach in a church not very distant from where they lived; once she had passed an Oldbury person in the street, an Oldbury tradesman, who had recognised her, and taken off his cap to her. In England such events would be always possible; and though Elsie smiled at herself for her folly in prizing such incidents so dearly, she found it cost her a hard

wrench to put herself finally beyond all chance of their recurrence. She and Margaret spent many hours during the next two months working at the outfit for their voyage. Margaret grew more cheerful as each week passed. She would talk a great deal to Elsie as they sat together over their work about the sort of life in America she hoped they would lead. She drew attractive pictures of a quiet little farmhouse in some sparsely populated district, where they would make their home and find rest and healthful occupation amid deep country quiet, and with scenes of a new kind of natural beauty round them, which would have no painful associations linked with it. They two, herself and Elsie, must take all the care and work of the household on themselves, not looking for any help or much companionship from the new inmate they would have. Margaret found it impossible to speak to Elsie of her father as any other father might have been spoken of to a daughter who had not seen him since her babyhood. Seventeen years of monotonous labour and association with depraved companions had driven away every trace of former cultivation, and irretrievably injured his mental faculties. Liberty could give him nothing now but rest, and the pitying love of the relations whose lives he had spoiled.

Seventeen years! Margaret would let her work fall from her hands sometimes and remain silent, while her thoughts flew back over the years with a kind of wonder that they should have been lived through. Seventeen years! And all that time his mother's thoughts and hers had followed the unhappy one down through every step of degradation and pain; accompanying him day by day in drudgery and shame

and remorse; mixing every hour of theirs with the thought of what his was—never losing sight of that; and now it was all but over. In a few more days he would be restored to them.

The work went on rapidly, and with the first spring days, when the budding of the trees in the parks, and the scent of the early flowers that were carried about the streets, made her think more than ever of Oldbury, Elsie began to lay the clothes she had made in the chests that were to accompany them on their voyage, scattering here and there a few precious lavender blossoms that Crawford had brought from their Oldbury garden. On what strange foreign air would the dear scent float when the lids of the boxes were raised again! It had been very strange to her, working at her father's clothes, and marking them with his name; and now, as she arranged them where his hands would take them out, the thought of him which, in spite of all her efforts had remained hazy, grew more distinct, and a stronger feeling of love came into her mind. A father after all, whatever else he was! A father for her who had never known father or mother. She began to be almost as anxious for the days to pass as Margaret, and to weary of them with the same feverish fancy that they lengthened out into interminable duration as they were counted by fewer numbers. A month! a fortnight! ten days! one day! and Margaret with her own hands packed up the suit of clothes her brother was to put on when he left the prison, and set out on her last expedition to Dartmoor.

Old Mr. Blake's bodily health was improving, while his mind grew feebler. He seemed to give little heed to the preparations that were going on round

him, and Margaret believed that neither the excitement of his son's return nor the long voyage to America would affect him injuriously. It had been arranged that they were to leave London for Liverpool, whence the ship sailed in which their passage to New York was taken, two days after the long-looked-for reunion had taken place.

Margaret set out early in the day, and was to return in the evening. It was a sunny April day, and in the course of the afternoon Elsie persuaded her grandfather to walk to a quiet part of Kensington Gardens with her.

The great black-trunked trees in the Park were glorious in their brief sheeny spring green. Scents of hawthorn in bloom floated in the air. As Elsie walked along glancing here and there, she felt as if she were taking a special solemn farewell of England and of her old life. She did not wish the hours of this day to pass away quickly.

Something (for since Margaret set out in the morning the hazy impression of her father had returned, and she could hardly say some one) was coming into the house to-night that would begin a new epoch in her life!

She meant it to be a time of true consecration. She prayed for strength to devote herself to her new duties utterly and quite ungrudgingly, but just this one day—this last English Old World day—might be given to thoughts of the past, and to tender farewells to all the beloved objects she was turning her back upon for ever.

Mr. Blake was soon tired of walking, and they sat

down to rest on a bench overlooking the water opposite the old Palace. How green and gay it all was! The water spread out like a thin sheet of silver at their feet. The young leaves over their heads fluttered in the warm wind. Elsie stared up through the branches into the blue above. They might almost as well have been Oldbury trees—she felt she loved them so.

"Good-bye, good-bye!" seemed to come silently from her heart with every breath she drew.

A gentleman and lady came, after a time, and sat down on a bench beside her. She would have moved away, but her grandfather had sunk into a doze, half-leaning against her, and she did not like to disturb him. The gentleman drew a newspaper from his pocket and began to read. By and by he called his companion's attention to a paragraph.

"Ah! I see the Chinese mail is in. Here is something about Sir Cecil Russel's arrival at Shanghai. Is he not a relative of yours? I think I met a son and daughter of his at your house last spring. Very pleasant young people I thought they were."

"His daughter and his nephew; they have both gone out with him. He has no son. Yes, they are relatives of ours; we are very fond of them. We had letters from the young people this morning full of amusing descriptions of their adventures on the voyage. But don't you find the sun very hot here? Let us get up and walk under the trees, while I tell you their news!"

How Elsie longed to follow and take hold of the benevolent-looking lady's dress, and beg her, as a

famishing person might beg for bread, for a word or two out of those letters—a scrap of the news she was pouring into indifferent ears! She need not say who she was, and it would not do him any harm to learn by chance some day, years hence, that some one who was going far away, never to come back again—never to be heard of in England again—had sat on that bench and craved for news of him.

What folly! what folly! Elsie pressed her foot firmly against the ground to keep herself from moving, and sat staring stupidly after the lady's floating purple silk dress as it receded down the grassy glade, through light and shadow, and then vanished from her sight, leaving the walk to its groups of ragged children and black London sheep again!

A far-off church clock struck five, and woke her out of her reverie. In another hour, Margaret would have returned—Margaret and her father. It was time to be moving. The hour for dreaming and regretting was over. She roused Mr. Blake, and they walked slowly homewards.

Crawford had been busy preparing refreshments for the travellers, and getting what she called the master's room ready. There was nothing for Elsie to do after she got home, when she had seated her grandfather in his arm-chair, and taken off her walking dress, but wander about the house and wait for Margaret's coming, with such calmness as she could command. She did not know whether it was excessive joy or excessive fear that made her turn so sick and faint as she stood at the window looking out. Crawford came and joined her in her watch. Her eyes

were red and swollen as if she had been crying a great deal over her work of preparation.

"If only my dear mistress had been here this day," she said, in answer to Elsie's inquiring look. "Ah, my dear! hers was a faithful, tender heart; and I can't get over her not being here to see the end. Nobody but me knew all she suffered. You must think of her, Miss Elsie, and of what she would have done for him if she had lived, whenever you need to keep your courage up. You must try not to tremble and look so white, dear; for with her gone, and your grandfather as he is to-day, it's a melancholy coming back after all!"

Elsie would have heeded her injunction if she could, but in spite of her efforts at self-control her face grew a shade paler still. As Crawford finished speaking, a cab stopped at the door, and there was Margaret helping out a white-haired man, almost as old and feeble-looking as her grandfather, who seemed to cling to Margaret's arm for support, and stared round with a bewildered, helpless air as they mounted the steps together. Elsie flew down-stairs and opened the door for them.

Margaret smiled at her, though her eyes were swimming in tears, but the new-comer did not seem to see her, and took no notice of her outstretched hands.

"He is more overcome with the journey than I expected," said Margaret. "The fresh air and the number of new objects he has seen bewilder him. He thinks it is all one of the visions he has been used to have in the prison, and he is afraid of our melting

away and leaving him. Let me take him upstairs, and in a little time the confusion will go off, and he will understand that it is really you who are near him at last.

"Father, this is Herbert come back to us," Margaret said quietly, as she led her brother up to her father's chair, and the father and son—bowed down, grey-headed men both, the circumstances of whose meeting seemed calculated to call forth such strong emotion—stood face to face, looking at each other languidly, with vague flickerings of intelligence and recognition passing over their faces as they gazed.

"Yes, it is Herbert," Margaret said again gently; "Herbert, who has been away so long, come back, never to leave us again." And then she led her brother to a seat and signed to Elsie to come and kiss him.

The meeting was over—the dreaded, longed-for meeting. It had been quite different from anything Elsie had expected, different from her hopes and her fears, but on the whole she was satisfied. She felt she could love her father. The worn face, from which even the expression of suffering had died out into one of dull, hopeless apathy, told a tale of past misery that made her forget everything else in pity. There was no need to fear that he would not want her help, or that he would be hard to please. His eyes followed her about the room wistfully all the evening whenever she moved, as if they could never be satisfied with seeing.

"This is little Alice. You are sure this is my little daughter Alice, and that she will stay with me?"

he asked Margaret many times, while Elsie busied herself in waiting on him, and once or twice he hesitated to take things out of her hand, as if he did not believe they were real. His mind refused to grasp the joy of reunion, once so passionately longed for.

This first evening of freedom, though Margaret sat close to him all the time, and Elsie held his roughened hands clasped in hers, was very little better to him than one of the many previous visions of it he had had while it was still far distant. They could not make him feel sure that all he saw would not by and by melt away before his eyes—could not succeed in making themselves more than deceiving images of the brain to him.

When they were not actually speaking to him he relapsed into a moody reverie, in which he seemed quite unaware of their presence, a state of mind which isolated him from them almost as completely as if he had been spirited back to his prison cell again.

Only now and then, when some object near him caught his eye, a book or a trifle from Elsie's work-box, he would start, and take it up eagerly in his hand, examine it closely, and lay it down again with a look of half-puzzled satisfaction dawning on his face.

The evening, every minute of which Elsie used to struggle to recall and fix in her memory afterwards, wore away almost in silence.

They sat together till very late, all three hand in hand; and when at last Margaret rose, and said they must separate for the night, a fuller consciousness of their presence rushed to the released prisoner's brain,

and he showed far more emotion at the prospect of losing sight of them for a few hours, than his first meeting with his daughter had called forth.

Margaret and Elsie followed him to his room, and he held their hands and looked at them with hungry, despairing eyes, and could hardly be persuaded to let them leave him.

"It is only for a few hours," Margaret said cheerfully. "Hours, remember, not months. You shall see us the instant you open your eyes in the morning, and you will be able to enjoy it better for having slept."

For a long time her words made no impression. It seemed impossible for him to measure the length of the separation, or look across the gulf of the night to the next day; but at last he became calmer, and consented to let them go.

"Yes," he said, "I understand, it will be morning when I see you again. Morning—daylight. I shall be able to understand things more clearly then, when I have slept. Yes, I am sure of it now, I shall see you both again in the morning. I do not deserve it, but I shall see you, and meanwhile I shall be glad to sleep."

Margaret looked into his room an hour afterwards, and told Elsie that he was sleeping tranquilly in the bed, with quite a smile on his face, and a look that recalled himself, as she had known him long ago, in the times when her recollections of him were pleasantest. She gave way then to the first tears she had shed that day, a flood of gentle, thankful tears, which washed away the pain of years from her heart. She

told Elsie how impossible it had once seemed that such a day as this should ever come: how in her first horror of her brother's guilt she had had dire struggles with herself before she could come even to wish for it; and how, when his repentance had softened her heart towards him, she had sickened in despair at the thought of the long long years, and the improbability there was of his having strength to drag through them.

Now that the day had come, it had brought its own pain.

"You see how it is," Margaret said to Elsie. "His body is released, but his mind cannot escape from bondage as easily. Solitude and suffering have built it into a prison-house, which we shall find it hard to throw down. Did you not feel how far away he was from us? How shall we get him altogether, and bring his soul as well as his body home to live with us and be healed by our love?"

Margaret could not sleep during the night for thoughts such as these. In the early dawn of the summer morning she got up and dressed, and stole noiselessly into her brother's room, to see if he still slept. She thought it probable he would wake early, and she wished to save him an hour or two of confused and anxious thought by being present at his waking.

Her first glance showed her that he had not stirred since she had left him on the previous evening. His head rested peacefully on the pillow, his right hand lay over the counterpane in the same position she had observed before. He had been very weary, and slept

profoundly now. Margaret came close up to the side of the bed. In the faint light the sleeping face looked rounder and younger than it had done for many a year, the deeply graven lines on the forehead seemed to have been smoothed out by repose. There was a smile on the lips that carried Margaret back years, to dim recollections of nursery days. She knelt down softly by the bed to pray till he should awake.

A flood-tide of recollections, sweet, terrible, bitter, peaceful again, swept over her while her head was bowed. This was he—the beloved playmate of her childhood; the admired elder brother of her youth; he who had for so many years been the dark shadow in the household; he who had spoiled all their lives. She glanced back over the grey monotonous years of her existence, till she reached its bright dawn of youth, when so much joy seemed to lie before her. Truly it was his doing that all her earthly happiness had been snatched away from her. With the thought her heart went up to heaven in a great cry. She did not grudge her life; she had no account against this unhappy one; only as the picture of the dismal life that had wrought ill instead of good rose up before her, she prayed for herself and for Elsie that it might be given to them to undo some little of the wrong, to use the experience their own sorrow had brought them, to lighten suffering somewhere, and so make the final result something less terrible. She did not fear that, having repented, he would not be forgiven. She was speaking to the Great Atoner, who had taught her to forgive; but she thought of the time when this sin-debased soul should have grown large enough, become pure enough, to see the wrong and misery he had wrought in its full signi-

ficance, and to hate it as it deserved to be hated, and she shuddered at the fearfulness of the vision it would have to meet. Must not forgiveness itself, love itself, be for a time the keenest punishment possible? In virtue of her kinship, Margaret felt the burden of the wrong done to be hers as well as his. The rest of her life seemed too short to spend in toil to make the account (not between him and his God, but betwen him and his fellows) something straighter.

The sun had risen, and there was broad daylight in the room when Margaret lifted her head from her prayer. When would the sleeper awake? A strong sunbeam streaming through a crevice in the window-curtain rested on his face, now showing it distinctly, white against the white pillow; the smiling, parted lips quite still.

A sudden pang of fear shot through Margaret's heart. She laid her hand over the hand on the counterpane. Its icy touch made her spring to her feet, and utter a cry that brought Crawford and Elsie into the room.

Crawford saw how it was in a moment. She drew Elsie from the room and returned to Margaret, who had dropped on her knees by the bedside again. Yes, it was all over. A very slight examination served to show that he had been dead some hours. He must have died in sleep, almost directly after he laid himself down.

The night that had divided them was longer than they had expected, and the morning that was to bring them together again removed from it by a wider space. Yet Margaret could repose her heart in trust that the morning of reunion would surely come.

"It is best so," she said to Elsie, when she brought her a few hours afterwards to kiss the cold forehead of the corpse stretched out on the bed; "he has been permitted to bear all the long punishment, and now body and soul are both free!"

CHAPTER XV.

An unexpected Meeting.

THE death of Herbert le Fevre removed the principal reasons that had weighed with Margaret in determining to leave England. After her brother was gone, she had no longer any motive strong enough to induce her to brave a long journey with so helpless a charge as her father in his present state of health, or to encounter the inconvenience of settling in a new country with no other companions than her father, Elsie, and Crawford. She continued for some time, after her brother's death, to make plans for leaving London, and taking a house in some quiet country place like Oldbury; but Elsie, equally with herself, shrank from the effort necessary for carrying out such a scheme. They allowed the weeks to slip on without doing anything, and gradually stronger inducements than mere distaste for change grew up to keep them stationary.

Old Mrs. Neale attached herself more and more to Elsie, and became so dependent on her society for her comfort, that Margaret was unwilling to separate her grand-daughter from her as long as she lived. Mr. Blake seemed to prefer the bustle and movement of the town; and Margaret found work in association with other workers of kindred spirit to herself among the very poor of London, which enabled her to fulfil

her purpose of devoting the rest of her life to the relief of suffering more effectually than she could have done anywhere else.

As months passed on, Elsie observed that a gradual change came over Margaret. She was not less grave than she used to be, but she was a great deal gentler. Her eyes lost the stony, far-off look they used to have; a smile would come into them now when they fell on a flower, or a happy-faced child, or on such a glimpse of sunset glory as can be seen between openings of houses in the dullest London streets and squares. She could look at beautiful things now without being stung with pain at the thought of one dear to her, to whom the sight of all beauty was forbidden. Though she was hardly aware of it herself, she was much happier than she had been for many years. She could rest and enjoy a fresh wind blowing in her face, or the scent of a flower, or Elsie's pleasant voice reading aloud to her, without the indefinable feeling of remorse for being comfortable, which used to come when every pleasure brought before her a contrast full of pain.

Outwardly her existence had much the same character it had had in Oldbury, but inwardly there was an immense change. She had ceased to lead a double life; an almost intolerable weight had been lifted from her heart. Her former scruples about mixing with her fellows were considerably modified. There was no longer any secret to be kept. To spare her father, she retained, and allowed Elsie to retain, the name of Blake, but she was quite resolved that the painful circumstances of their family history should never again

be concealed from any one with whom she was brought into contact. She confided the chief particulars of their story to the clergyman of the parish where they lived, asking him to repeat as much of it as he thought necessary to her fellow-labourers in the works of charity in which she was engaged, and after that she had no further difficulties or scruples. Her new associates all had too much work on their hands, and were too much accustomed to be brought into contact with tragical histories, to be disposed to show undue curiosity respecting hers, as the good, gossipy Oldbury people had done.

Mr. Blake did not now engross Margaret's whole time in attendance on himself, as he had done while they lived in Oldbury. Since his wife's death, and more especially during the last few months, he had seemed to prefer Elsie's company to Margaret's. He had quite laid aside the labour to perfect his literary work which he had persevered in fruitlessly for so many years. His anxiety about it seemed to have passed away entirely, and his mind to have reverted to the interests that had occupied him before he became engrossed in one special line of study. Elsie's voice and manner recalled his wife to him, as she had been in her youth, and all the associations of his earlier years came back to him whenever his granddaughter was with him. The disappointments and anxieties of the intervening time were evidently rapidly fading away from his memory. Margaret was glad to find that the spell which had bound him to such constant labour was broken at last; and knowing how good it was for Elsie to have the occupation of waiting on her grandfather, she did not scruple to give herself

up more and more to the work among the poor that had opened out to her, and to leave the care of Mr. Blake a good deal in Elsie's hands. It was not such a heavy charge as it would have been some years ago. Mr. Blake was comparatively happy in his present delusions. In the summer time Elsie used to take him out in the parks, in the early morning and in the cool of the evening, and he would find amusement in watching the riders or the stream of carriages pass by, while he talked to Elsie about old acquaintances and long-past pleasures, almost as eagerly as Mrs. Neale was in the habit of doing. Sometimes the riders who passed them, sauntering along in the cool, pleasant summer twilight, would turn round and cast a surprised glance after the strange, noble-looking old man, and the lovely, pale girl in half Quaker costume, who supported him with her arm, and wonder vacantly for a moment or two how such a pair came to be there alone, and what sorrowful history attached to their strange, beautiful looks. Yet there was so much dignity about Mr. Blake still, such an air of peculiar refinement in Elsie, that the boldest lounger would not have dared to accost them or annoy them with any intrusive attentions.

Elsie felt more utterly alone with this crowd of strangers passing and repassing before her eyes than she would have felt in the most solitary spot anywhere in the neighbourhood of Oldbury. Now and then gentle girl faces in the carriages that drove by attracted her attention,—faces that seemed akin to her, as if they ought by rights to have belonged to sisters or friends of hers; or perhaps some pleasant-looking lady, while walking near her, would speak a word or

laugh a laugh that recalled Cecil's voice, and Elsie's heart yearned towards the speaker. Yet none the less did she feel divided from them all, by a gulf as great as if she and her grandfather were thin speechless ghosts wandering on the outskirts of a world they had quitted for ever—seeing all, but powerless to establish any communication with the substantial living people among whom they moved unseen.

Sometimes, as she listened to her grandfather's rambling talk about old times, and people long since passed away, she was half disposed to believe they had both died a long time ago, and had wandered back by mistake to a world that had no place for them.

When the weather was not fine enough for walking, Mr. Blake's great pleasure was to frequent the reading-room of the British Museum Library—entrance tickets for which Gilbert Neale had procured both for him and Elsie. There he would contentedly spend the greater part of the day handling and seeming to read the books that were brought him. Pleasant associations always seemed to come back upon him while he was so occupied. He held his head higher—an expression of wistful half-intelligence came into his face. He looked almost the interested, eager student he had been in that same spot years and years before. Generally Elsie sat by his side reading, or copying illuminations from old missals; but sometimes she grew weary of the constraint of sitting still for so many hours, and when Mr. Blake was happily engaged, and did not seem to want her, she would leave the library, and on days when the Museum was not open to the general public she would wander up and down

the silent echoing galleries and staircases till it was time to take her grandfather home. It was a weird kind of place to muse in, when the great halls were emptied of their usual crowd of visitors, but it suited Elsie's mood. The calm colossal heads staring blankly down on her, the broken fragments of statues, the beautiful strange sea things, the bright tropical birds and animals in their motionless mimicry of life, grew familiar, and seemed to enter into her reveries as constituent elements of them—miles and miles of dead, detached, broken things which had had some meaning, and some place, and some life of their own once—Elsie felt a great deal nearer to them, a great deal more at home with them, than with the people in the Park. No one interfered with her wanderings; the officials of the Museum took a kindly interest in the superannuated old scholar who haunted the library, and in the beautiful girl who watched over him so carefully, and they were all anxious to show her every courtesy in their power.

Weeks and months passed in this way, gliding rapidly into each other. The most intense pain is mitigated by time; and Elsie began to wonder at the tranquillity and peace that had come into her life. Was it peace, she sometimes asked herself, or was it only deadness? By the time another spring and summer and winter had gone by in the same quiet, eventless fashion, she could hardly believe herself to be the same person who had grown up in Oldbury, and felt as if her very life was being torn from her when she had had to leave it. The time of strong feeling she had known there, of short, vivid joy and of agonizing pain, lay very, very far away from her now. It looked

like another life, from which she thought she was definitely cut off. What had once seemed impossible to be borne appeared quite natural and inevitable now. One year would follow another just as the two last had done, quiet and grey, and she would bend her will more and more earnestly to the cheerful, contented bearing of her lot. New interests were gradually creeping into her life; and she knew she must honestly strive to make them thrust further and further away the thoughts that belonged to the past—the useless thoughts and regrets, that were alternately sweet and bitter, but always poisonous food for her mind to dwell on. During the first few months of her residence in London, several trifling incidents had concurred to put her in possession of small items of news respecting Oldbury and Oldbury people—foolish, useless pieces of information—which yet had filled her with immense joy, and made of the days on which she obtained them epochs of interest to count the passing of time by. Later these chances had become rarer, and the last year had not brought her a single one. Even the ingenious little schemes she sometimes concocted to make Margaret or Crawford talk of old times, and mention Oldbury names, seemed invariably to fail now. She began to think that a spell of silence had fallen on her that would never be broken again.

It was not that opportunities were altogether wanting which might have led to her hearing one or two of the chance mentions of dear familiar things which she longed for. Gilbert Neale was frequently at his mother's house. He often came there straight from Connington. He would sometimes in Elsie's

presence go on talking for an hour together of places he had visited, and people he had seen, yet during several months he never once happened to bring in one of the words Elsie thirsted to hear. She chid herself for going to her grandmother's house whenever she knew that her uncle was there with such a foolish fluttering of hope in her heart, and for coming back when the evening was over so weary with disappointment. What could it signify to her? If even *his* name had come into the talk, if even she had heard that he was coming back to England, what right would she have had to be interested in the news?

When she had suffered a great many disappointments, she began to tell herself she was cured of ever expecting anything to happen again. She believed she had come to the conclusion that it was best not to have remembrance stirred by hearing the names of people with whom she should never have any further connexion, who had quite passed out of her life. She tried to resolve that she would not even wish to hear, that for the future she would be thankful, not sorry, when an evening in her uncle's society passed over safely without any little word being spoken to disturb her tranquillity.

She said all this very emphatically to herself one sunny April morning, as she sat in her usual place at her desk in the Museum Library, assiduously copying a picture from an old illuminated book.

She had begun her drawing two days before, when she had had the prospect before her of seeing her uncle soon. She had spent the previous evening with him at her grandmother's house, and to-day he was

on his way back to Connington. Oh, how foolish she had been two days ago to be in such a state of agitation at the thought of what she might possibly hear from him, that her hand had trembled in tracing those curves! How foolish! How foolish! Well, the opportunity had passed. He would certainly not come again for three months at least. Fortunately she could acknowledge it was much better for her that the anticipated evening had proved a complete blank; that he who could have told her so many things she would have liked to hear, had talked for hours and said nothing, absolutely not one word. Yes, it was better for her not to have her peace disturbed. Was it peace, or was it death, famine, starvation? He might have given her a little taste of life-restoring food! He must often have walked down the dear streets, and seen the names written over the shops, and been stopped by acquaintances, and heard words spoken that she would have been so thankful to him for repeating ever so indifferently.

Elsie pushed the missal from which she was copying hastily aside; the illumination was in greater danger now than when her hand had trembled. A treacherous tear had nearly fallen and blistered the priceless page. What could it be that made the longing for Oldbury streets and faces come so strongly over her just at that moment?

Such a flood of recollections rose that she could almost fancy she had been spirited away in a moment to Oldbury, and that she was standing on the doorstep of Elderberry's little house, with the scent of the lavender bushes in the Rectory garden blowing full in her face.

She put her hand over her eyes to press back the tears that obscured her vision, and then looked round to convince herself of where she really was.

The entrance-door to the Library, which was close to Elsie's seat, had opened a moment ago, and a party of visitors, under charge of one of the curators of the Museum, had come inside to look at the reading-room, and were whispering in what were meant to be low tones quite within Elsie's hearing.

A broad, good-humoured, rosy face, with a flutter of gorgeous ribbons round it, caught her eyes. She must be dreaming still; or had she been asleep for years, and just awakened in the middle of a Sunday morning at Oldbury Church, with Mrs. Adams in her best bonnet seated in the pew opposite? Yes, it was a whiff of Oldbury rose-leaves and lavender that had come to her. The stout lady moved aside, and Elsie caught a glimpse of a certain white knitted woollen shawl (oh, how well she knew every leaf of the pattern on it!) which had always had a faint perfume of lavender and rose-leaves hanging round it since Elsie could remember anything.

The quaint little elderly figure round which it was folded came in sight next. There was no room for doubt, and, awake or asleep, Elsie could sit still no longer. She rushed to the door just as, in despair at the talkativeness of the party he was escorting, the gentleman who had brought them in swung it wide open to let them out; and she had presence of mind enough not to throw her arms round Miss Berry's neck till they were safe outside the hall of silence, in a passage where there were only a few passers-by and the umbrella-keepers to be scandalized at the

exclamations and hand shakes and breathless questions and answers that followed.

Good-natured Mrs. Adams was almost as vehement in her expressions of delight at their unexpected meeting, as Miss Berry; and from her Elsie at last heard a coherent explanation of the circumstances that had led to their being at the Museum that day.

She told Elsie that she had come up to London to be present at the marriage of one of her granddaughters, and had persuaded Miss Berry to accompany her to her daughter's house, and pay her a long-talked-of visit. They had already been three weeks in town, but this was the first day they had been able to give to sight-seeing. Miss Berry had had some business to attend to, some one to visit whose address she had to seek out, and much time had been taken up in the search; then there had been the wedding. But this one leisure day had come at last, and it was Miss Berry who had decided on spending it in visiting the British Museum.

"My dear," struck in Miss Berry, squeezing Elsie's hands, which she still held tightly, "I thought only of my map, and of seeing the likeness of Joseph's Pharaoh, in whom, as you know, I always have taken such a particular interest; and to think of his having led me to you!"

When the excitement of the first few minutes was over, Mrs. Adams had the consideration to draw off the attention of the rest of the party so as to leave Elsie and her dear old friend to themselves. They walked up and down the lower Egyptian Hall, among the black sarcophagi, and wandered into cool, damp-smelling galleries, where ancient Babylonians stab

each other endlessly on the walls, and talked, feeling as if they could never say all they had in their hearts, or look at each other enough. It seemed at the time to Elsie the most unreal of all the day dreams she had dreamed in that place: Oldbury news, mixed with exclamations from Miss Berry respecting the wonders she could not keep her eyes from wandering towards sometimes; the old dear, rambling, affectionate, familiar talk that Elsie had so thirsted after, and never thought to have heard again.

"Oh, Elderberry, if you knew what it is to me to see you again!" was about as much as Elsie could find voice to say for some time; and even when she felt collected enough to ask questions, she found that her queries rather hindered than expedited the communications of which she was so greedy, and that it would be safest to let Miss Berry bring out her news in her own way, and keep the curiously interwoven sentences in her mind, to be unravelled at her leisure afterwards.

"Was it, could it be me you came to London to look for?" Elsie asked eagerly, when Miss Berry was mysteriously hinting at some secret mission which, far more than any wish to attend Miss Adams's wedding, had induced her to undertake such a long journey at her age.

An expression of perplexity crossed Miss Berry's beamingly happy face.

"My love, I think, if you please, we will walk on a little faster and get into another department, where perhaps I shall be better able to collect my thoughts. I confess it confuses me a good deal to have all the Pharaohs, and so many other Scripture characters as

I am told there are in this room, staring down into my face. I cannot help pausing in what I am saying to think how I can best introduce them into the map, with that tiger-headed woman to serve as an example of a monstrous idol. Well, now that we are come among the Babylonians, with whom I have never felt I had quite so much to do, I shall be able to give more undivided attention; and, my love, though your question embarrasses me a little, I will be perfectly. frank with you. I did, I confess it, my dear, that last evening when he came back to Oldbury for nothing in the world but to talk to me about you—and, poor fellow, the state of mind he was in—I did make him a kind of promise, and it troubles my conscience very much sometimes to think that I have never once in all these months written to China, or taken any decided steps to get the news of you he was so anxious for. He must think me very ungrateful, for I have received the kindest letters from him and presents—a magnificent China crape shawl, which I have left in my will to you, Elsie:—to that length I think I may safely go in encouraging the attachment. And now that you have been thrown in my way in such a providential, unsought manner, in a place too that, what with the tombs and the Scripture characters, may be almost said to rank with a church, I shall certainly feel justified in writing him a little letter, and just mentioning casually that I have seen you. I do not suppose I should have been quite so scrupulous hitherto, if such awful instances of disobedience to parents with respect to matrimony had not occurred in Oldbury. You do not mean to say that you have not heard? Then you may well be surprised at see-

ing me here. It was not for your sake, to tell you the truth, my dear, that I undertook a journey at my time of life; it was to look after those unhappy young people, Richard and Sophia Lutridge, who have brought such trouble on their parents and such disgrace on all Oldbury. If dearest Mrs. Lutridge could have risen from her sofa, but she cannot, she would positively have gone down on her knees to thank me when I ventured to suggest that, as I was nobody of any consequence, and had no character for consistency to keep up, I might come to London and find her poor children out, and make the first overtures to reconciliation. That the eldest son and daughter of such a family should make runaway matches within two months of each other—you can conceive the thrill of feeling that went through Oldbury when the news came out. I grieve to say that there were found some even among the district visitors cruel enough to insinuate that if dearest Mrs. Lutridge had meddled less in her neighbours' concerns, and made her home a little pleasanter to her own family, the scandal might never have occurred. It was a heartless remark, my dear, and I never shall be again able to feel quite cordially to the Tomkinsons. Such a time to turn round on an old benefactress too! for, independently of these unlucky marriages, things are not with the Lutridges by any means as they used to be. It seems that, owing to some carelessness of Mr. Richard's, affairs at the bank began to go wrong. There were difficulties. Some people who have lost money complain a good deal, and the dear Lutridges themselves have been obliged to give up Laurel Lodge and come down into the town to live."

"That must have been a great trial to Mrs. Lutridge," said Elsie, a little blankly, for she could not help being disappointed at the turn the conversation had taken.

"She bore up very well till the story of Mr. Richard's marriage with the daughter of the man who keeps the little public-house at the bottom of the hill came out. You may remember her, my dear—a large young woman, with a red face and a quantity of shining black ringlets, as unlike you as it is possible to conceive, and at least fifteen years older than Mr. Richard. Mr. Lutridge was disposed to be lenient, in spite of all the trouble and disgrace his son's carelessness (and I fear worse than carelessness) had brought upon him; but Mrs. Lutridge thought she owed it to Oldbury to let her displeasure be shown plainly. When she heard that the marriage had taken place clandestinely at a church in Bristol, months before the parents on either side knew of it, and that two of her daughters had long been aware of what was going on, and had connived at their brother's misconduct, she was so indignant that she declared she would never see her son again, or forgive her daughters for their share in his ruin. Poor girls! they used to come to me and cry a great deal, and talk of their having always been so afraid of their mother, and of the discomfort and disunion at home, which they said had driven them all to underhand ways. It ended in poor Miss Sophia's running away with one of the bank-clerks who had been turned off for unsteadiness a year before, and in Miss Ursula's resolving to go over to the Church of Rome, and drawing young Walter Neale, who is a weak youth I am afraid, my dear,

into a secret correspondence on the subject. It seems they proposed to escape to France together, and there to take monastic vows; but as I understand now, they have changed their minds, and are content to form a marriage engagement instead. It strikes me that this is the simpler and less objectionable arrangement of the two, but it has met with much opposition from Walter Neale's friends. I have heard that his mother still refuses her consent, and that Mr. Lutridge is quite bowed down with shame at the want of right feeling and sense of propriety his poor daughter has shown in her conduct throughout the whole affair. Some people say that Mrs. Lutridge does not feel it nearly so much as he does; but, my dear, I leave you to judge: she has never been outside her house for a whole year! Oldbury is a changed place in consequence. The way in which the servant-girls stand talking and laughing at the area gates of an evening now, and the style of bonnets they go to church in, are proof enough that she is no longer the person she used to be. People speak their minds and arrange things in an offhand way that is quite startling. One hardly seems to know now what sides people are on, or who ought and who ought not to be visited. Mr. Pierrepoint and the incumbent of the district church walk about together arm in arm. Little innovations (of a very pleasing sort, I must confess) are actually creeping into our service at the old church; there is a talk of our having 'Hymns, Ancient and Modern,' when the old hymn-books are worn out; yet Mrs. Lutridge takes it all quietly, and does not offer an opinion. She seems to have lost heart to interfere about anything now. If the Pope himself were to

come and attempt to preach in Oldbury I really don't think it would stir her up. When I consulted her about my journey to London, and suggested that I would, if she pleased, trace out poor Sophia, and ascertain whether the rumour we had heard about her husband's actually ill-using her was well-founded or not, and call on Mr. and Mrs. Richard, and bring her news of their baby—instead of being angry with me, and ordering me out of the house, as I quite expected she would, she broke down, sobbing, my dear,—only think of that, Mrs. Lutridge!—and when she had recovered herself a little, she spoke of my faithful friendship and kindly influence over every one, in terms really as if she had taken it into her head that there had been some mistake, and that it was I, and not she herself, who had been doing good in Oldbury all these years. It was a distressing scene, indeed. Dearest Mrs. Lutridge almost, one may say, humbling herself to *me!* You will not wonder, I am sure, that, with such heart-breaking warnings before my eyes, I have been scrupulous and doubtful about the wisdom of keeping up in Stephen Pierrepoint's mind certain hopes and fears. I see what a brilliant colour has come into your face, my love, and I know that I am approaching a delicate subject. If I had not been taken so unawares I would have thought it over, and made up my mind how much I should be justified in repeating what he said to me the last day he was in England, when he read your little note, and was completely overcome at the thought of going so far away without prospect of hearing of you again. Poor fellow! I always knew what a great amount of deep feeling there was hidden under that playful manner

of his, which, in spite of one's dread of levity, one could not help finding very winning. He was always making a joke of me and saying perplexing things, and yet, my dear, you would hardly believe how much older I feel since he left England; and how I miss all the little kindnesses he was always showing me, and the sight of his pleasant face coming into my room. However, as I have not had time to consider what I ought to say, and feeling bewildered, as I do, with so many Pharaohs and Sennacheribs standing round, I think it will be more conscientious of us to change the subject. Let us speak of something else. Ah! there are Mrs. Adams and the others coming to look for us. I fear we have been keeping them waiting an immense time. And that wonderfully clever gentleman, who told us all about the world before it was created, must be getting impatient for us to go. I will give you one kiss before they all come up. Yes, I love you as much as ever, my dear Elsie; and I understand what your eyes are asking me, though you speak in such a low whisper that I cannot quite catch the words. I will write to China to-night, and I promise to post the letter before I have time to think it over and get frightened. He has begged me over and over again to write, even if I have nothing to say about you; and now I think I shall be justified in sending a letter and putting in some allusion (not too explicit perhaps) to what has happened to-day. It will be a difficult task, but I trust I shall be enabled to express myself judiciously, and avoid saying more than I ought. Unfortunately we go back to Oldbury to-morrow morning, and I have promised to spend the last evening with the poor Richard Lutridges at

Camden Town, so I am afraid this must be good-bye. Mrs. Adams is beckoning quite impatiently, you see."

Elsie followed her friends to the outer door and took an affectionate leave of Mrs. Adams, whose daughter, as kind-hearted and rosy-faced as herself, gladdened Elsie's heart by asking for her address, and promising to call on her sometimes, and let her know how the two elder ladies settled down in Oldbury after the excitement of their London visit.

She did not re-enter the building till the last flutter of Mrs. Adams's floating bonnet-strings was lost in the crowd outside, and then she discovered how late it was, and that she must hasten back to her grandfather, from whom she had never before been so long absent. Fortunately he had been happily occupied, and had not missed her. He did not ask her any questions when she came back, or appear to notice anything unusual in her countenance as they were walking home together. The event of the last hour and a half, which had somehow or other made all the world look different to Elsie, would have no interest whatever for him. She did not think it necessary to attempt to talk to him about it.

Margaret was more observing. When she returned home late in the evening after a hard day's work, she saw that something had happened almost the moment she opened the door of their dull little lodging-house drawing room. Elsie was seated at the open window with her hands resting idly on her lap, looking over the leafless lilac bushes in the dusty square garden towards an opening in the opposite row of houses, which showed a patch of sky and a silvery crescent

moon, just then faintly marked in the pale blue. Her restful attitude struck Margaret almost as much as the happy, dreamy smile on her face. It almost startled her. It spoke of a mood very, very far removed from anything she herself had experienced for many a year; yet she understood what it meant very well. She knew that Elsie did not see the dusty lilac bushes, or even the shining silver boat sailing in that narrow river of London sky. She had taken some treasured remembrance out of her mind, and was looking only at that. She was conning over some words, or bringing back some looks, weighing them and appraising them as if they were jewels, and smiling to herself to discover how rich beyond her previous reckoning she was. It must be something she had heard lately, for Margaret had never seen her look like this before. She went up to her softly and laid her hand on her shoulder. "Well?" she could not help saying in a tone of inquiry, as she looked down into Elsie's changed face.

"Oh, Aunt Margaret, what do you think has happened to-day?" Elsie began eagerly.

Margaret's face expressed a little surprise and disappointment, perhaps, as Elsie's narrative went on; she had evidently expected to hear something of more importance, and indeed, as Elsie related the incident of the afternoon, it hardly sounded a sufficient reason for feeling so radiantly happy. After all, what had happened? She had, by the merest chance in the world, encountered an old friend who would probably never come across her path again; and that was all. Elsie's joy was somewhat checked by Margaret's matter-of-fact way of listening to the news she had to impart.

She began to think the meeting, which had seemed little short of a miracle, almost commonplace and natural, as Margaret calmly commented on it; and Miss Berry's words hardly seemed worth such endless pondering over as she had been disposed to accord them a few minutes before. But the glamour that the daylight of Margaret's reason dissipated, returned again the very first time Elsie was alone, and could translate the story back into her own heart's language. Miss Berry's words turned into priceless pearls and diamonds once more, and with them in endless variation she embellished all the sultry days of the summer that followed, and wove garlands, and made lamps of them to lighten the gloom of a dreary autumn, till a certain day in the winter came and brought fresh emotion with it.

CHAPTER XVI.

Miss Berry's Letter.

A WIDE low room spread with matting, but in other respects furnished like an English drawing-room, and littered with music, work, and sketches in a fashion that spoke of a lady's constant occupation of it. A large window opening on to a shaded balcony filled with flower-pots, where a few roses and geraniums and a clump of English daisies drooped in the heat; and from which, now that the curtains of the awning were drawn aside, a glimpse of the sea blazing in sunlight, of a squadron of English and French men-of-war in the distance, and of strange-sailed, strange-hued Chinese junks gliding past, could be gained by the occupants of the room. These were just now only two, who had lately deserted the shadier parts of the room for the window recess. Cecil Russel stood a little way out on the balcony braving the glare and the inquisitive glances of some almond-shaped black eyes from the streets below (to say nothing of unsavoury whiffs from the same locality which entirely overpowered the faint perfume of the flowers and tainted the fresh sea-breeze), while she stooped down and picked off some faded leaves from her plants, and touched with her finger the burned-up earth round the roots of her melancholy looking withered Oldbury daisy.

Stephen Pierrepoint, who had risen from a table laden with books and papers a minute or two before, and come to the window for no apparent purpose but to see what she was doing, stood leaning against the window-sill, alternately watching her and spelling out a sentence in a Chinese book he held open in his hand.

They both looked a great deal older than when Oldbury knew them—older than the additional three years that had passed over their heads at all warranted—till they spoke, and then each face regained something of the playful animation and openness of expression that had given it its peculiarly youthful look a few years before.

They had been talking and laughing eagerly over some incident of the day a few minutes ago, almost in their old openly familiar brother and sister fashion—almost, but not quite. They had never been quite as intimate since they left England as they used to be in the old days before they spent a summer together in Oldbury, though Cecil was perhaps the only one who was conscious of the slight barrier of reserve that had grown up between them. They stood now close together, quite at ease in not talking, and only let fall a sentence now and then as they pleased. When Cecil had finished watering her flowers, she remained on the balcony with her hands clasped behind her, looking out dreamily towards the sea. A somewhat weary, anxious expression grew into her face as she gazed; and it was with a quick sigh and an impatient gesture, as if she were struggling to shake off a weight, that she turned towards the room and took up the desultory conversation again.

"What an odd feeling it gives one to look out upon the sea for long together! The motion of the waves has a strange sort of power over one. I feel as if I were gradually slipping out of my body as I look, and floating away just over the tops of the waves—not exactly touching them, but borne along by their rocking. If I went on staring long enough, I do believe I should go. I should get to England that way, or somewhere."

"That sort of feeling was what the Greeks meant by their stories about the sirens, I suppose," said Steenie carelessly. "Have a little bit of prosaic practical Confucian philosophy to put your body and soul into comfortable relations again. I'm reading from one of the most approved Chinese books of instruction. Here is what serves a follower of Confucius for spiritual nourishment. The subject of the treatise is duty to parents; and there are examples recorded for general imitation; it is a sort of sacred history in fact, handed down for all generations to ponder over. You shall hear a sentence or two: 'In the Chang dynasty, Sin Li, when fifty years of age, still resided with his parents, and was subject to their will. To prevent them from considering themselves old he affected the manners of a child, and sported and gambolled before them in gaily-coloured garments. He would pretend to stumble in walking like a babe. All this he did to divert his aged parents. In the Tsin dynasty, Mang Tsung mourned the death of his father. During the winter season his mother desired bamboo sprouts made into soup. He went into the forest, and, grasping a bamboo with his hands, burst into tears. Such filial devotion moved heaven and earth; and in a little

while the earth opened and sent forth several bamboo sprouts.' This is said to be the original cause of bamboos sprouting in the winter as well as in the spring, by the way."

"Well, but that is a little less prosaic than I expected. It is a miracle."

"No, a thoroughly unspiritual marvel; that is to say, the most prosaic, degrading subject of belief in the world—akin to Cagliostro tricks and table-rapping—the thing that is sure to result from a creed which starts by disowning every attempt to get beyond the region of the senses."

"Well, but I don't mean to let myself be entangled in a discussion on Chinese religious systems just now. If we must talk metaphysics, explain to me how it is that I have found myself forced to think so much of Oldbury this afternoon without any particular reason, for really we all have present anxieties enough just now to fill our thoughts."

"I can explain that without metaphysics; it is nothing more than the scent of the Tonquin beans in the little box you brought down in your hand to-day that has carried your thoughts off in that direction. Don't you remember you had it—the box—with you in Oldbury that summer? and one day when you happened to say you liked the smell of Tonquin beans, Miss Berry took some from her work-box and gave them to you. If you lift up the lid of the left hand division, you will see I am right."

"The idea of your remembering all that! I had forgotten the very existence of this box till I turned it out this morning from the packing case where it was stowed the last time there was a talk of the rebels

taking Shanghai, and Papa sent me on shipboard. I don't believe the lid of this division has ever been lifted since that day when—yes, it was Elsie Blake who shut the beans in. They feel quite at home, I should think, in this hot sunshine. Will you have one?"

"No; what should I do with it? Shut them up for another three years. Shall I read you some more?"

"No, no, I am not in the humour for it, and I wish you would not pretend to be. Nothing in the world bores me so much as listening to a person talking of what he is not thinking of, and you are always doing that to me now."

"I know something that would bore you still more—to listen to a person talking of what he was thinking of on post days. You would get very tired. I flatter myself I am not quite such an intolerable bore to you as I *could* be."

"Oh! is the mail in? I actually had forgotten to expect it. My principal correspondents are growing lazy, and seldom send me any interesting news. I don't reckon on post days as I used to do, though, of course, one is always glad of anything from home."

Cecil turned to the window and looked out towards the sea again for some time in silence.

"It would all be less dreary if it were more thoroughly unlike what one is used to," she said, turning a dissatisfied glance back into the room at last. "I wish we Europeans did not all huddle together, and make such desperate attempts to do exactly as we have been doing all our lives. If I could have turned myself into a Chinese lady for these three years and

lived among the natives, I should at all events have got some new ideas, and seen what would have served me to think about for the rest of my life. As it is, I have seen nothing that does not look like England, but a few dirty streets and shops, and a little strange vegetation. When we have a party of English residents here, and the ladies are talking together, I could shut my eyes and fancy myself in Oldbury. We may have changed our skies, but we certainly have not changed our minds by coming all this long way."

"Comfort yourself with the probability that some day or other the rebels will swoop down on Shanghai and carry us all off prisoners into the interior. We shall, no doubt, get a very satisfactory insight into the mysteries of Chinese life by being carried about the streets of Pekin in wooden cages; and if we survive the process, we shall have plenty to talk about for the rest of our lives."

"You have lost your chance of such promotion by volunteering to go up the country with Lord Elgin and the army, leaving us behind to take care of ourselves."

"Yes, but I get something better than the bare possibility of seeing the inside of a Chinese wooden cage, for I suppose there is no doubt there will be some more fighting before we have done with it. We shall all be too busy for lounging and translating Chinese saws soon, I hope."

"I know there is no use hoping for a word from Papa or you after the mail is in, but you will see that I have my letters soon, won't you?" Cecil said,

coming out of the balcony and preparing to leave the room.

Stephen followed her to the door, and stopped her just as she was opening it.

"Cecil, you sha'n't have to say again that I never talk to you of what I am thinking about. There is no use asking, for I am sure you would have told me if there had been anything to tell, but you never have had any answers to your letters to Miss Berry, have you?"

"No," answered Cecil sorrowfully; "and it puzzles me dreadfully how to account for her obstinate silence. You are as much at a loss, I suppose; for though your father writes you such long letters, he contrives, man-like, never to tell anything in them."

"No, I am not at a loss; I think I understand perfectly well why she does not write; I have made up my mind about it. She knows something she cannot bear to tell me, and is silent for fear of letting it out. That would be just like her. She would be sure to write if she had nothing to say."

"What sort of thing do you mean?"

"Nay, that is just what I am continually changing my mind about. I don't often think *she* is dead; Miss Berry would have told me that, whatever pain it cost her to write it. I expect she is married, and has written to tell Miss Berry so. It is three years since they left Oldbury. Why should she not be married?"

"You need not look so fiercely at me, I am not going to urge any reasons why she should not; only I think it is rather a gratuitous supposition on your part. You know all the difficulties and objections.

Why should another person have found it easier to get her than you?"

"I was hampered; besides, her father is dead. That might make a difference in their way of life. I showed you the announcement of Mr. Le Fevre's death in a newspaper that came from England some time ago, and you were struck with the peculiar way in which it was worded."

"Yes, I liked the 'died penitent.' I am sure Margaret Blake drew up the paragraph, and that it was not her doing there was ever any mystification or concealment. I wish you could have gone back to England."

"But I cannot. It would be absolute disgrace to leave the country in the position of affairs now."

"And Papa could not possibly spare you; he is overworked as it is, and he is always saying you are the only person about him who gives the kind of help he most wants. He seems to think that he might have been obliged to go to the north himself if he could not have sent you, and if you had not known as much of the language and the ways of the country as you do. You can't think how thankful I am that he is spared the fatigue and the danger."

"I am not sanguine that there is likely to be any danger to speak of; but at all events the chance of coming in for anything of the kind instead of him, makes up for a great deal. Not that I have any particular wish to get back to England now; I am convinced it would be a useless journey, and that I am better here."

"Well, then, we will all stay till we have been paraded about in cages, and have adventures to tell

that will make lions and lionesses of us for the rest of our lives. Let me go now; there is a large party coming to dinner, and I have some orders to give."

The next two days were unusually busy ones with the consul and his secretaries. Cecil saw but little of her father, and was not able to have a word with her cousin till late in the evening of the third day after their conversation, when he came into her sitting-room with an open letter in his hand.

"I hope you were satisfied with your budget?" he began.

"I had a number of letters. People are beginning to be anxious about us in England; all my interfering friends and relations are storming at Papa for not sending me home. I have had to tell him flatly that I won't go. What were your letters?"

"Two from Oldbury—one from my father, and one, a long one, from Miss Berry."

"At last! Well?"

"Cecil, I was right. Take the letter and read it. It is even more disjointed and exclamatory than Elderberry's productions used formerly to be; but you will make out what she wants to tell me. It was startling news at first, but now I think I am beginning to understand it better."

Cecil took the closely-written sheets to the light, and stood frowning over the difficulty of making out the cramped handwriting. Soon there was an exclamation of amazement, and as she turned the pages backwards and forwards to refer to previous sentences, the expression of perplexity deepened on her face.

"What can she mean by saying so much at the beginning of her letter about disappointment, and about people marrying differently from what one would expect when one thinks of their first loves? Then comes all this long story about the clandestine marriages of Richard and Sophia Lutridge, which she says prevented her answering our letters, and at the end she speaks of going to London and seeing Elsie Blake. One does not see the connexion of the ideas. One guesses, from the beginning of the letter, that she found Elsie married, but she does not say so."

"As clearly as she says anything else. You have overlooked a sentence at the end, where she says she little thought, when we were all together that summer in Oldbury, that one of the Lutridges would be preferred to one of us."

"Do you know (it is very obscurely expressed)—but I am inclined to think that sentence refers to me? Walter Neale is engaged to Ursula Lutridge. Can she be thinking of any gossip she may have heard about him and me long ago?"

"No, no. Allowing for Elderberry's style of narrative, it is clear enough what she means. Richard Lutridge has married, it seems, without the consent of his friends. They disowned him, and lost sight of him for a year or so. Miss Berry goes to London with overtures of reconciliation, not knowing exactly where to find him, and unexpectedly falls in with Elsie—his wife—at the British Museum, as she describes. You see, she says she spent the evening with them—with Mr. and Mrs. Richard Lutridge—and that she has asked them to go and stay with her in Oldbury. He was a great fool certainly, but he was

fond of her. I can understand how it has come about."

"I can't. Elsie Blake married to Richard Lutridge! It seems utterly impossible. They must have been married some time, too; for don't you see at the end there is something about a baby, and their living in lodgings and being very poor?"

"Well, never mind; give me the letter back. It's not a very lucid production, but we have wrung all to the very dregs of the bitter truth out of it. We need not discuss it any further."

Cecil folded the sheets slowly and put them back into their envelope. "I wish I understood why Miss Berry did not write at once," she said reflectively.

"She tells us it was because the Lutridges were concerned in the affair. I suppose till just now they were anxious that Richard's marriage should be as little known as possible. After all Mrs. Lutridge used to say against the Blakes, her son's marriage may well be a bitter pill for her to swallow."

"But that Elsie should marry him clandestinely—such a man—Steenie, I can't bear to think it. It alters my thought of her—it degrades her."

"No, don't say that. I've been thinking it over and over ever since that letter came, and it does not lower *her*. If there has been any mistake, any wrong in her conduct, I am to blame for it. She has felt that I deserted her, that I shrank from sharing the family disgrace with her, and his conduct has stood out in favourable contrast to mine. It has looked like generosity, and that is just what would move her."

"But you did not desert her?"

"No, but it may very well have seemed to her that

I did. A person with fewer scruples and more opportunities of seeing her might easily make her believe he was willing to risk more for her than I was. I hope that horrible old woman down at Oldbury won't have much to do with her. Unless Dick Lutridge is very much changed, he won't be able to protect her against his mother. How will my father behave to her when she goes to stay with Miss Berry? I wish I had known in time to write to him about it."

"Steenie, how can you bear to talk as if it were certain?"

"It is certain. I tried to disbelieve it yesterday, but to-day I can't. You will not be doing me any kindness by talking me into doubt again. It is at all events a good thing for me just now to know that there is nothing to make me in a hurry to get back home. I am more glad than ever that Lord Elgin has consented to take me up the country with him, and that we shall be moving soon."

Cecil thought a great deal about Miss Berry's letter, and would have liked to have read it a second time; but she could not make up her mind to ask her cousin for it again. He was to leave Shanghai soon; and though his time was very much occupied with business, he contrived to join Cecil in her early and late drives, and to spare quarters of an hour for chat with her more frequently than he had done hitherto. They talked a great deal about Oldbury, and Stephen was now always the first to bring up recollections of past times, and make allusions to events and places connected with Elsie Blake which he had studiously avoided formerly. Cecil could not quite make it out. She thought he was trying to harden himself, and

force the scenes that had hitherto had such a halo over them to look commonplace, by talking of them indifferently.

"Why should I have any objection to speak of Mrs. Richard Lutridge?" he said once, when she made an effort to turn the conversation. "It is time I got accustomed to it. She has been married a year and a half by this time, and has outlived sentimental recollections long ago, you may be sure. It is quite time I did."

It was clear to Cecil that, whatever he might say, the thought of having been supplanted by such a rival as Richard Lutridge was a very deep wound to pride as well as to affection. Sometimes, however, he would talk about Elsie in a strain Cecil liked better. He would discuss anxiously the probability of her being happy under her new circumstances, and recall little traits of kindliness or good feeling displayed by Richard Lutridge in his school or college days, which made it less improbable that he would prove a competent guardian of Elsie's welfare than Cecil was disposed to believe.

Stephen insisted on the impossibility of any one having Elsie's constant companionship without being improved by it. Cecil privately thought that Elsie was the sort of woman who, if she married beneath her, must inevitably sink to the level of her husband. She did not say so, but her demurs led to discussions that were apt to lengthen out and occupy the whole evening. It required all Cecil's tact to follow the changes in Stephen's mood during one such conversation: the alternations between dislike and contempt of Richard Lutridge, and anxiety to think well of him for Elsie's

sake; the rapid transitions from a condition of hurt pride towards Elsie herself to a relapse into tenderness.

The barrier of reserve that had existed more or less between the cousins for nearly three years had disappeared all at once. Cecil felt as if she had slipped back some years in her life, and got into the middle of what she called the Oldbury summer again.

It was a busy, exciting time. Talk of impending war and danger, and busy preparations for the departure of the allied forces northwards, were going on round her, but she scarcely heeded it, the change in her own inner life was so absorbing.

Sometimes she felt very happy, and found herself tripping up and down stairs, or sitting idle, with her hands before her, in a sort of dreamy, hazy, brightness of mood that she thought she had definitely cut herself off from years ago. At other times she was restless and dissatisfied with herself. She felt as if she were letting herself be gradually drawn towards something, which she would not look at or recognise because she did not wish to be convinced she ought to avoid it.

One day, about a week before Steenie was to leave them, her father stopped her on the stairs when she was flashing past him in one of her gay moods, and surprised her by an unusually warm approving kiss on her forehead.

"My darling, I am glad to see you in such good spirits; you set an example of public spirit to us all. I was afraid you would make yourself anxious about Stephen's leaving us to go with Lord Elgin, instead of taking a sensible view of the matter, and entering into

his satisfaction at being employed on such an important service."

"I am so thankful that you have not taken it into your head to insist on going too!" Cecil said, hastily returning his kiss.

It was quite a true saying, but Cecil was not exactly content with it when she was alone, and came to think it over. Her father's praise forced on her the self-examination she had been avoiding for the last three weeks, and the discoveries to which it led startled her.

Steenie was going away, probably for a long period, to be exposed to considerable risk and danger; and somehow she felt more as if he had just returned to her after a long absence, than as if she were preparing to wish him good-bye.

The habit he had resumed of coming to talk to her about everything, just as he used to do in their school-boy and school-girl days, and more, some tones of voice, and words spoken lately which were not quite like the old days, made her feel as if they should be much nearer together a thousand miles apart now, than they had been living in the same house during the last three years. She had suffered a good deal from the sort of half separation that had grown up between them, even while she had said emphatically to herself that it was quite natural, and nothing more than what every sister has to go through when a very dearly loved brother, in the inevitable course of things, takes some one else into the first place in his heart, and has thoughts and interests she cannot share. It seemed now as if her brother was coming back to her again, all the more ready to value her sympathy and

companionship because he had been disappointed in what he had tried to put in its place.

Cecil walked up and down the room, quite forgetting what she had come upstairs for, while she tried to persuade herself that there was no harm and no danger here, nothing at all derogatory to her own dignity or injurious towards Elsie in the strong sense of happiness which his return to old ways had brought to her.

But she was too honest and too discerning to succeed in her effort at self-deception. After a little while she left off walking up and down the room, and covered her face with her hands to look down into her heart more closely yet. Recollections of the thoughts and feelings of the Oldbury summer crowded into her mind. She remembered the pain she had felt when she stood on the bridge over the Idle one gloomy day, and how she had resolved to do what lay in her power to help Elsie and Steenie to remain true to each other. She thought of a warning her father had once given her not to let herself be drawn into accepting a poor pretence of a love, founded on mere chances of companionship. A love founded on wounded pride and impatience of disappointment would be a far worse pretence, even if it were the dearest, dearest companion, the one person who pleased her best in the world, round whom all the pleasantest recollections and brightest thoughts of her life would always cling, who offered it to her. It would be unworthy of him to offer it. She must not take it; must not let him, from the mere impatience of pain, try to console himself in such a false way. If Elsie had failed him ever so unworthily, it would still be a mis-

take to try to drive out her image by putting another hastily in its place. And, besides, was it quite certain that she had failed? Had there not been some impatience and want of faith in her, shown in their acceptance of the worst interpretation that could be put on Miss Berry's puzzling letter? The doubt came like a flash of enlightenment into Cecil's mind, and the half-remembered, confused words of the letter began to arrange themselves in her memory with quite different meanings from what she had seen in them before. At all events, it would be a wise test to take to try her own feelings and Steenie's words by, that she should not allow herself to feel, or suffer him to say anything, the recollection of which would spoil their satisfaction if they found out that there had been a mistake, and that Elsie was still free. Cecil's thoughts grew calm after she had made this resolution. She remembered she had come upstairs to look for something for her father, found what she wanted, and went down and sat attentively working by his side all the rest of the morning.

She was somewhat sober-minded, and her father did not compliment her on her spirits again during the rest of the week; but she did not make any attempt to keep out of her cousin's way, or cut short any of the long conversations they fell into when they were together. He had many hints to give her about ways in which she might, to a certain extent, supply his place to her father while he was away. She could not help being grateful for the careful arrangements he made to save her perplexity, and for the care he took to anticipate the work as far as possible, that she

might have little to do on the first few days of his absence while it was new to her.

It was not in her nature not to express her gratitude very warmly now and then, and she felt a good deal of dismay sometimes at the thought of what the house would be to her when there would be no one in it to look after her interests and understand her wishes instinctively as Stephen, even when they were not so very openly intimate, had always had the power of doing.

The house had been very full of guests for a long time, but Stephen entreated that they might spend the last evening before he left Shanghai alone.

Sir Cecil had been ill all day from the heat and from overwork, and Cecil's anxiety about him occupied her thoughts almost to the exclusion of what was going to happen next day. In the course of the evening Sir Cecil was called away on business, and when he had left the room Stephen made Cecil come out with him on to the balcony to look at the moonlight on the water, and admire for the last time the French and English men-of-war steamers that were to begin their voyage northwards on the morrow. They spoke about Sir Cecil's health first, and discussed the possibility of his having to resign his appointment and sail for England before Lord Elgin's return from the north. It seemed very probable that after to-morrow's good-bye they might not meet again till they met in England.

"How many years hence, I wonder?" Steenie asked. "My uncle has been advising me to stay on here if he is unfortunately obliged to go home. He thinks his successor, whoever he may be, will be very glad of my services, and that it would be a pity for me to throw

away my three years' experience of the work here, gained under him who understands this horrid country as no one else does."

"But it will be a very different thing for you working with a stranger. You would not like it," said Cecil. "You would find it a great change coming back to this house with fresh people in it."

"I should think so. I shall have a great respect, and still more wonder at myself if I find I can bear it. I suspect, whoever my new chief proved to be, I should desert him, and rush home by the first mail after the war was over. Cecil, would it be worth my while to come home after you; or would you advise me to stay on here for another twelve years or so, climbing up step by step into notice as a useful public servant with a convenient knowledge of Chinese devices for cheating, till I got as sun-dried and pompous and red-tapey as C—— or D——, and could come home on a pension? It would be a nice life, would it not? and I should enjoy myself when I got back, and found I had outlived every one's knowledge."

"I think it would be possible to lead as satisfactory a life working here as anywhere else," said Cecil. "You know we have often talked about it, and settled what a great work there is for English officials to do in places like this, whose future depends so much on the way in which English influence acts."

"Yes, yes; but if I had not you to talk philosophy to me about it, what heart do you suppose I should have for anything beyond the necessary routine? No, I see exactly the log I should grow into if I stayed on long here alone."

"But if you really think it would be bad for you, don't stay."

"Coming back to England under some circumstances would be worse still. Cecil, I begin to think I have been a great fool, and made a thorough mess of my life—some people do that—stretching stupidly after an unattainable thing that was not meant for me, and passing over a prize that with proper effort I might possibly have won. Is it very unpardonable to be blind to what is best suited to one because it chances to be near?"

"I suppose it is always best to stretch out towards what seems to be the highest good, even if it is unattainable. The straining to make oneself worthy of it is the best for one."

"I did not say the unattainable prize was the highest; that turns out to be a stupid mistake I made. I am ashamed of boring you about myself this last night. How tired you would be of the subject if you had not an inexhaustible fund of goodness for me. I can't understand it—it is wonderful, after all my changes of temper and moodiness, that you have not given me up in disgust long ago. What should I do if you did? Cecil, after all there is nothing in the world so good as such a friendship and such perfect confidence as we have always had together. People who have once learned to know each other through and through as we do, can't have misunderstandings, or slip away from each other, whatever circumstances they may be placed in afterwards. It is something solid to rest on; the best foundation, I am convinced, for the closest relationships. I begin to suspect that falling in love is all a mistake, and that the greatest happiness of life

is to be found in such an affection as ours. Don't you think so?"

"It is a very good thing at all events," Cecil said confusedly. "But oh, Steenie, wait a minute" (for Stephen had come close to her and tried to take her hand), "I have got something to say to you. Let me have my turn to speak before you go on, please."

Steenie drew back, surprised at her vehemence, and she looked steadily in his face, though she felt the tears starting to her eyes, and found it was all she could do to keep her voice steady.

"You said just now something about its being the last night, and so much may happen—you may have to make up your mind on such important subjects before we meet again. You must not mind my asking you a question—saying something that has come into my mind about that letter of Miss Berry's you showed me three weeks ago."

"Say whatever you like," Stephen answered in a voice that had changed very much since he spoke last, and whose tones struck a chill through Cecil's heart.

"You must, please, not be vexed. You told me not to talk you into hope again; but, Steenie, do you know I think you are doing wrong. I think it is just impatience, and perhaps a little pride, that makes you determined to be so very sure. I know that after a long suspense, when a thing seems very hopeless, there is a sort of relief in thinking one has come to the worst, and can rightly make an effort to turn away and bury the old pain. There are times when one wants to do it very much, even when with the pain one has to bury a love that perhaps is not dead, or

anything like dead, only benumbed or wounded. It is very dangerous to do such things in a hurry, for then the pain and the love may get up and be a greater torment than ever. There is no use in putting one feeling for another either, and calling it by a wrong name, to try to get consolation out of it. That never answers. I don't want to talk you into fresh hopes that might bring worse disappointment afterwards, but I do want you to be patient, and not to make up your mind about the meaning of that letter till we have made inquiries and learnt more precisely what has happened in England."

There was a long pause when Cecil ceased speaking. Instead of answering her, Steenie crossed his arms over the railing of the balcony, and stood with his back turned to the room, gazing out upon the sea, till Sir Cecil's step re-entering the room roused him. Then he started up, took Cecil's hand quickly, and pressed his lips on it.

"At all events I was right," he said, in a quick low voice, "about our knowing each other through and through. You have read me better than I understood myself. I don't yet agree with you about there being any hope still, but I see now that it was impatience of pain, cowardice if you like, that has made me try so hard to convince myself that it was all over. I understand you quite. Forgive me—I don't deserve that you should—but, at all events, I promise faithfully never to inflict my hopelessness on you again after the fashion of to-night, or presume to call our dear old friendship by a wrong name."

Sir Cecil called his daughter to come to him before she had time to answer, and she was not sorry to

be excused from speaking again. She did not feel that she had been quite thoroughly understood, and she had felt a good deal of pain in hearing some of Steenie's words, but then she felt tolerably sure that no amount of talking would bring anything to lessen it.

Cecil was engaged with visitors the next day when the hour for Stephen's departure came. She heard him come out of her father's room, where he had been closeted in close conference the greater part of the morning, and ask for her. Then came his quick step running up the stairs; and Cecil, who had been giving somewhat short, irrelevant answers to her visitors' questions for the last five minutes, got up hastily and went to the drawing-room door to meet him. He looked very much disconcerted when he saw how the room was occupied.

"I have been religiously saving the last quarter of an hour for you. I have a great deal to say. Can't you send those people away?"

"Impossible! It is the C——'s and the D——'s, the most easily offended people in Shanghai. I should never hear the last of it."

"Well, then, I must resign myself to be troubled with the ghosts of uncomfortable thoughts all the time I am away, since you refuse to lay them for me. Only one word I must have. You have forgiven me for last night; we are the same friends as ever; it is not to make the smallest difference?"

"Nothing ever could," Cecil said, holding out both her hands. "Now, good-bye! Mrs. C—— is wondering why we are whispering together, and thinking that such a long hand shake is not necessary, even when

one is going to the wars, and does not know when one shall see one's friends again."

"I shall see you again before very long, for, if you leave, I shall follow to England as soon as possible. I have been reading over that letter, and things have grown wonderfully clearer to me since last night, and I think I see my way. Here are two letters I sat up nearly all night to write—one to my father, and one to Miss Berry. The answers to them must bring certainty of some sort; and meanwhile I have taken out a new lease of hope. You will see to their being posted, won't you? I leave them with you."

He was gone the next moment; but Cecil saw him turn round after he had left the house to wave another good-bye to her as she stood out on the balcony with her guests. She was glad to have that last bright, upward look to recall in a time of fearful suspense and anxiety that followed.

CHAPTER XVII.

News.

THE younger Mrs. Adams did not forget the promise she had made to Elsie on the occasion of their chance meeting at the Museum, to call on her occasionally and bring her news of Miss Berry and of Oldbury. Whether it was curiosity, originally excited by the gossip about the Blakes she had been used to hear in Oldbury, or simple kindness of heart that drew the busy, self-important lady from her home at Clapton all the way to the sombre lodgings in Bloomsbury Street where old Mr. Blake and Margaret had fixed their abode, mattered very little to Elsie. She had the satisfaction, not once only, but again and again during the ensuing summer, of seeing in their own sitting-room a face that she had previously seen in Oldbury, of hearing familiar names, Oldbury names, spoken with an approach to adequate interest and circumstantiality; and of putting questions which her visitor could answer satisfactorily without drawing all the conclusions from her asking them that a native of Oldbury would undoubtedly have drawn.

Mrs. Adams had all the right of a born and bred Londoner whose husband's relations lived in a country town, to smile at Oldbury peculiarities, and profess contempt for Oldbury gossip; but if Elsie's tender feelings were a little wounded sometimes by slighting

remarks on old friends, there was compensation in the belief that her own history was not as constantly in her companion's mind as she would have known it must inevitably be if one of her old fellow-townswomen had been seated opposite to her. She could gratify herself by ascertaining that the mulberry tree in the Rectory garden had withstood the severe gales of the last winter, and even venture a timid question respecting Mr. Pierrepoint's health and spirits; and Mrs. Adams could answer indifferently without relaxing her stealthy watch from the window for the return of the hired brougham that had taken her daughter on to pay another visit while she sat with Elsie.

Such absorption in one's neighbours' concerns as comes naturally enough in Oldbury, is not easily reconciled with the necessity of getting over a great deal of ground, and crowding a number of visits into one afternoon, which regulates intercourse between acquaintances in London.

Still, there was a sufficient degree of interest aroused to prevent the intercourse languishing; and in the hot August days, when everybody was leaving London, Mrs. Adams and her daughter came together to tell Elsie that they were about to take their departure for Oldbury, where they were to spend the autumn, and to offer to convey any message or token of remembrance she might wish to send to her friend Miss Berry.

Elsie collected some of the prettiest of the illuminations she had copied at the Museum, hoping they would be allowed to fill up vacant places in the map on Miss Berry's wall, wrote a hasty note to her friend,

and saw the parcel containing them carried out by her departing visitors with almost as much trepidation and with as many doubts and qualms of conscience and self-questionings, when the first excitement was over, as if she had been sending a token to Stephen Pierrepoint himself.

All through the dusty, scorching August weeks, while the square gardens got daily browner and drearier, and the wide, handsome streets looked sleepy and deserted like the streets of some enchanted, dead city in an Eastern tale, and the crowded courts behind them bred sickness and fever that sent Margaret home from her ministrations among their inhabitants with a sadder face each day, Elsie's thoughts found refreshment in flying off from the objects round her to follow her present, and imagine the exact positions occupied now by the little drawings, over which she had pored on many past winter days.

How would the sunshine slanting through the flowering plants on the dear old window-sill make patches of light and shade over them on the wall? Who would stand under them and glance up, and perhaps ask a question, causing her name to be spoken again in the place where she longed to be remembered always? Years and years hence, when the bright colours on the illuminations had begun to fade, would not some one, looking round the room to note the changes time had made, with quick glancing eyes that always saw everything, remark the little pictures, and walk straight up to examine them closely, and then turn round to Miss Berry with the sudden illumination of eager interest all over his face that Elsie could picture so perfectly—eager interest—nay, perhaps only a

vague curiosity after so long—a hesitating question perhaps—and after the answer another look; yes, surely another long look, for the sake of old recollections, that, however deeply buried and put away, must be stirred to faint life again by all that he would see there?

There was danger in such speculations as these, agitation and unrest. When her reverie reached this point, Elsie would forcibly bring herself back into the little stifling room in Bloomsbury Street, where the afternoon sun beat in mercilessly, unimpeded by any screen of flowers, and seek some engrossing occupation; or if her thoughts would by and by insist on another excursion, she would confine them to the contemplation of Miss Berry's room with no more interesting visitor than Miss Tomkinson or old Mrs. Adams in it.

November had come; the streets and squares had wakened into a dull sort of half-life. Margaret's patients were sickening with cold instead of fever, and the little Bloomsbury Street sitting-room had accepted heavy yellow mist instead of dusty golden sunshine for its habitual atmosphere before Elsie heard from the Adams's again. Then, on one specially gloomy day, when old Mr. Blake was indisposed, and would do nothing but sit cowering over the fire, and Elsie, worn out with efforts to amuse him, had been driven for change of employment to slow pacing up and down the little room, and listless watchings from the window of the passers-by in the wet street, they came, bringing in with them a bustle and movement and cheery clatter of voices such as had not been heard in the house since their last visit. They would have been

dearly welcome to Elsie just then, even if they had not come a few days before from Oldbury, and had been less redolent than they were of the atmosphere of the place.

Three months in Oldbury, three months of seeing the same people every day, and hearing their concerns perpetually talked over, had not passed without giving a colour to their thoughts which was still predominant. Mrs. Adams quite forgot to calculate how long they were keeping the brougham, and drew her chair close to Elsie's, and talked with almost as much animation as her mother-in-law might have done, of how old Dr. Medlock had taken a partner, a tall, fresh-looking young man, who was well received by the principal families in the place; of how there had been a talk of her father and mother-in-law taking Laurel Lodge, which had been empty ever since the Lutridges left it, but Miss Berry had dissuaded them out of the idea, for fear Mrs. Lutridge should feel hurt, and suspect Mrs. Adams of wishing to instal herself as leading lady of the town; of how very broken down and elderly Mr. Lutridge looked now, how shabbily the daughters were dressed, and how little likelihood there seemed to be of that engagement between Miss Ursula (who was not the least bit pretty now) and young Mr. Neale of Connington ever coming to anything.

Elsie sat listening with a soft pink glow deepening minute by minute on her fair face, and a lovely light shining in her eyes, half of gratitude for the treasures of information she was gaining, half wistfully expectant of some word, some hint, some stray scrap of coveted intelligence that might be expected to be spoken soon

It was all very interesting, for it was all about Oldbury people; but as the time slipped by, she wished that Miss Adams would not turn the conversation back to the new doctor so perseveringly, and expatiate so lengthily on his being such an acquisition to the society of the place. It was not of acquisitions or of new-comers she wanted to hear; and the colour faded out of her face, and her eyes clouded over when Mrs. Adams looked at her watch at last and rose to go, before the name which had been hovering on Elsie's lips all the afternoon had been spoken by any one.

"But oh, mamma!" Miss Adams exclaimed, turning back just as she had reached the door, "I suppose Miss Blake will have heard the sad news from China. She will guess the terrible trouble there is at the Rectory. The telegram had not arrived when we left, or I suppose we should be thinking more about it ourselves. Grandmamma said in her letter yesterday that no one in Oldbury could talk or think of anything but of poor Stephen Pierrepoint. It is dreadful for his father, is it not? Have you seen the newspaper account?"

"No," Elsie just managed to say; and as she had risen from her seat, and was standing with her back to the light, no one perceived how white all of a sudden the lips had become through which the low monosyllable came.

"Dear me! but it is pasted up before all the newspaper shops. I wonder it has not attracted your eye. 'Six Englishmen, and eighteen privates belonging to one of our Sepoy regiments, treacherously attacked

and taken prisoners by a detachment of the Tartar army.'"

"But how do you know that——?"

Miss Adams's impatience supplied the words Elsie could not speak.

"How do I know that Stephen Pierrepoint is one of those that have been taken? Unfortunately there can be no doubt about it. Mr. Pierrepoint has had official intelligence. His son had volunteered to go up the country with the army in Lord Elgin's suite as interpreter, or aide-de-camp, or something. That is why we have all of us in Oldbury been taking so much interest in the Chinese expedition this summer. One does not, you know, in a general way, care much what happens in those out-of-the-way countries—at least the Oldbury people don't; but this year it was felt to be a proper compliment to Mr. Pierrepoint to be interested in what our army and Lord Elgin were doing. The news has been most satisfactory, except for this one mischance. We have taken the forts about which all the dispute has been, and a truce had been proclaimed. The small party of which poor Stephen Pierrepoint was unhappily one were on their way to the Chinese camp, to carry an answer to some negotiations the Chinese General had begun about Lord Elgin's going to Pekin, when they were treacherously set upon by a whole body of the enemy's troops, and either killed or carried off somewhere. Very little seems to be known about it at present. Papa says we ought to hope that they were killed on the spot, for the Chinese are such dreadfully cruel people, and treat their prisoners so horribly, that if they were spared it would only be to reserve them for

worse tortures. Nothing more can be heard till the next mail comes in, and perhaps we shall never know exactly what their fate has been. It is dreadful, is it not? to think of such a thing happening to a person one has known and heard of all one's life. There will be great anxiety felt about Stephen Pierrepoint in Oldbury; but perhaps——" A sudden recollection of something she had heard long ago, or the sound of a painful gasping breath which Elsie was struggling to keep from rising into a sob, stopped her in her glib narration of horrors; and she added, "Perhaps I ought not to have told all this so suddenly to you."

"Why not?" Elsie answered after a minute's silence, in a forced voice that sounded to herself strange and unlike her own. "Why not? Why should not I know what all the Oldbury people know and are sorry for? I was an Oldbury person once; I have as much right to hear and be sorry as most of them."

"Of course we are all very sorry. Even people who do not know any of the parties concerned personally are shocked and indignant at the thought of such a fate befalling Englishmen. You may depend upon it that the Chinese will be made to pay dearly for their treachery," said Mrs. Adams, in a tone that was meant to be consolatory and triumphant.

"But that won't bring the poor captives to life again when they have been killed by ill-usage, or do much good to their friends, Mamma," observed Miss Adams, intent on seeing things in the gloomiest light.

"Well, I don't know. The general sympathy will be very soothing, and I should not wonder if the Queen herself were to write letters of condolence to

the near relatives of the sufferers. If Mr. Pierrepoint gets such a letter, it will be a great interest to every one in Oldbury; and no doubt all the principal families in the place will subscribe and put up a marble monument to poor young Pierrepoint's memory in the old church. Mrs. Lutridge would have set such a scheme on foot immediately, if she had been what she once was; and now I should not wonder if it falls to your grandmother or to one of us to propose and carry it out. Things have changed so these last few years in Oldbury. But now we positively must go. It is a great deal later than I had any idea of. Really it is so pleasant chatting over Oldbury news, one quite forgets oneself."

When the door had closed behind her visitors, Elsie sank down on the chair from which she had risen, and remained quite still for a long time. "As much right to hear and to be sorry as any of the Oldbury people!" Those were the words that went on repeating themselves stupidly over and over again in her mind. She would not let her thoughts get beyond them, and understand distinctly what the terrible thing was which they might all grieve over together. Yes, she had as much right as any of them to be stunned and bewildered, and to feel as if her heart were turning into stone under the horror of the picture that had been presented to her, and which she would not look at again just yet.

She was roused by her grandfather's querulous voice complaining that he was cold, and that she had nearly let the fire go out; and she rose and went up to him and began patiently putting the coals together,

and then knelt down to fan the dull embers into a flame.

The exertion brought back the power of understanding and feeling; all the words she had heard rushed upon her in their full meaning, and she was a prey to the pain she had been mechanically warding off.

She comprehended what had happened; saw it all vividly, just as if it were passing now. Dark, fierce, angry faces gathering round a solitary band of riders; a short, fierce struggle, and then solitude again, in some far off, distant, strange scene—solitude broken only by a little heap of prostrate, still figures, one of them lying a little apart from the others. But no, his would not look like a dead face. Do what she would, the eyes, full of pain and yearning, would always open and look across the long distance at her. She saw all this distinctly as if she must see it always, yet she went on kneeling before the fire, diligently flapping a sheet of paper to and fro; and she was aware of the little, swift, darting tongues of flame as they flickered up and fell in the current of the air, for they seemed to sting and pain her, as if they were actually eating into her flesh.

By and by the fire burned brightly again, and her grandfather lay back in his chair and dropped asleep, not needing any more attention from her. She sat on the hearth-rug with her hands clasped round her knees. New thoughts began to creep in, fresh painful aspects of the subject she was contemplating:—a whole month before anything further could be known by those who had the best right to hear of him soon; and for her, the chance of hearing the worst con-

firmed or denied, months hence perhaps, in some carelessly-spoken, ill-authenticated words, or of never knowing anything more of never learning the few scant particulars that would be written or told to others. Never, never.

Yet as this thought stung her with a still sharper pang than she had yet felt, she did not throw herself down on the hearth-rug or cry aloud with pain. Yes, she had as much right, just as much right to be sorry as any one in Oldbury; but people do not cry out with pain when they hear that an acquaintance, or even a friend with whom they have had no communication for years, is dead in ever such a terrible way.

A sharp postman's knock came just then, and Elsie heard it through the tumult of her thoughts. It was not an unusual sound, for there were other lodgers in the house who often had letters; but it made Elsie start up with sudden nervous energy, as if it must necessarily announce some news for her. The next minute her heart sank again lower than ever. Oh, it would be always so! from this time forth she should be always hoping for news, and always sickening with disappointment when it failed to come. A fever of restlessness seized her now. She ran half-way downstairs, and met the servant coming up with lights, and —yes—Elsie's eyes fastened on it at once—a letter, a large letter, directed in a cramped, shaky handwriting to her.

"I brought it up at once, Miss," the servant said, with an inquisitive glance into Elsie's face; "it is not often as letters come for any of you."

Elsie snatched it from her, ran back into the room, and had read her letter half through by firelight before

the servant and the candles reached the top of the stairs.

It was from Miss Berry, and her breathless perusal of the first page brought nothing but bewilderment. She hurried on, hoping that the meaning would dawn on her as she read.

"My Dearest Elsie,

"Miss Ursula Lutridge is sitting with me now, and she has been so kind as to find out all about the trains, which I could not possibly have done myself; so I hope you will be able to travel here without any difficulty. She says you will not get my letter in time to come by an afternoon train. I wish it had been possible for you to start at once, that dearest Mrs. Lutridge's mind might sooner have been set at rest; but I will be content to expect you to-morrow, at the time she has written down on the piece of paper I enclose. Your little room will be ready; for, making certain that you would not refuse to come, I told Caroline to light a fire there directly after dearest Mrs. Lutridge opened her heart to me about her wish to see you. I am afraid it will be a trial to you to come here under these sad circumstances; for when I went up into the little attic just now, and saw all the pretty things *they* sent in that year, it all came back to me so vividly—just how handsome and merry he looked the day the new furniture arrived, and what odd excuses he kept inventing for each new present as it was brought in. But, my love, we will not believe the worst yet. Mr. Pierrepoint is resolved to cling to hope as long as possible; it is only dearest Mrs. Lutridge who seems quite unable to take any but the darkest view of what

has happened. She accuses herself on account of some letter which she ought to have given to you, and which she destroyed instead. She thinks that if you had had it you might have written something to Stephen Pierrepoint in reply that would have prevented his going out to China, and that he might have been alive and well in Oldbury now. She sent to Mr. Pierrepoint this morning and confessed her misgivings to him; and I am afraid in his agitation he spoke rather strongly. She has been in hysterics since, and nothing will serve her but to see you, and judge by what you say yourself whether or not she need have this terrible responsibility on her conscience. Of course she thought she was acting for the best in keeping back the letter; and, my love, don't you feel that the more unhappy we are the more ready we ought to be to forgive those who seem to have had a hand in bringing the trial upon us?

"Your affectionate Friend,

"MARY ANNE BERRY.

"P.S.—A message has just come across the road from the Lutridges' house. Miss Tomkinson has, injudiciously I fear, been showing dearest Mrs. Lutridge some pictures in the monthly *Missionary Magazine* of Chinese prisons and modes of execution. Another fit of hysterics has been the result. Do not fail to come as early as possible to-morrow."

Elsie was still reading her letter when Margaret entered the room. She had returned home later than usual that evening, and had mounted the stairs lingeringly, with a very heavy heart, wondering how she

should break to Elsie the news she had accidentally heard that day.

It was a relief to her when she discovered, by the first glance at Elsie's agitated face, that she had already heard all she was dreading to impart to her,—heard, and was somehow differently affected from what Margaret had feared. As Elsie came forward to meet her, and put the letter she had been reading into her hand, there was an eagerness almost of hope in her manner that quite took Margaret by surprise. The worst part of her pain had gone out of Elsie's heart as she read. Her thoughts had fastened on the sentence in Miss Berry's letter which implied that Mrs. Lutridge had kept back some message from Steenie to her, and she was drawing comfort and courage from that idea. There were words of his to her which she might hear yet—which she might hear, perhaps, to-morrow—that was, his being alive to her, alive and nearer to her than he had been for a long time. She could not despair with such a prospect before her. The warmth it brought to her heart forced her to hope. He had not gone away thoughtless of her; he had been as true to her as she had sometimes ventured to dream. He could not be dead then, just as she had found out she might rightly love him as much as she wished. This conclusion seemed perfectly logical to Elsie.

Margaret read Miss Berry's letter through slowly.

"What do you feel about it yourself?" she said hesitatingly, when she had come to the end. "Miss Berry has always been a good friend to you, but it is asking a great deal. You may go to Oldbury if you

like now; but I do not see that you are called upon to make the effort if it will cost you too much pain."

"Pain!" cried Elsie; and then, suddenly reading the expression on Margaret's face, she added quickly, "I understand what you mean. You said *now;* you would not let me go to Oldbury if you thought there was the least hope."

"Nay, I do not say that," Margaret interrupted. "I think there will be pain—pain and embarrassment for you in going back to Oldbury, whatever news from China may be heard while you are there; and I think Mrs. Lutridge ought to bear her own share of the anxiety she has brought on herself, without aggravating yours. However, dearest, you are old enough now to decide for yourself. If you think it right to go to Oldbury, and wish to hear what Mrs. Lutridge has to say to you I will not say a word to dissuade you."

"Then I will go," Elsie said. "Till you came in, I never thought it even possible to do anything else after I had read this letter."

Going back to Oldbury alone! For the rest of the evening Elsie moved about, making preparations for the next day's journey in a dream. Moments of deep depression and shuddering realization of the circumstances under which it was undertaken came over her; but, for the most part, she had a bewildered feeling as if it were Stephen Pierrepoint himself, instead of only the hearing of some words of his to her, written long ago, that awaited her there.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Back in Oldbury.

It was a dim, still November morning when Élsie began her journey to Oldbury. She had hardly been able to see Margaret's face for the thick clinging mist when they parted at the station; but in a minute or two, when the train had left the smoke of London behind, she looked out on nothing more gloomy than a sky covered with a thin veil of lilac grey clouds, and on sodden dark-green fields spread out beneath it. There had been a night of tempest, but the storm-clouds had wept themselves away now, and the trees were sullenly rocking their bare branches to rest, wearied out after all their wild sobbing and raving for the last remnant of leaf-clothing, which the night wind had torn from them.

Elsie felt as if she were already back in Oldbury; "at home!" she called it, when she was quite clear of tokens of the town neighbourhood, and could look over solitary fields once more. She was glad it was not a bright morning. Sunshine on the green grass would have seemed to mock her—the quiet sadness was a sort of welcome.

She had not seen country trees and hedgerows since she had travelled this same road with her grandfather and Margaret, when they were leaving Oldbury. How vividly all she saw recalled her feelings of that time.

So very few events had occurred in her life during the three years she had spent in London, that their history could have been given in a sentence or two; yet, looking back to her feelings of that time, it seemed a lifetime ago.

She felt as if the storm of sorrow had wept itself out in her heart too; she could only be still and wait, not altogether hopelessly.

As she neared the end of her journey, and one well-known object after another met her eyes, she felt something like a shock of surprise. She had thought of them all so much, brought them before her so often by efforts of fancy, that she could hardly believe in the possibility of their being really near—just the same as she had seen them in her dreams—not the least changed: the distant purple hills rising in the same perfect curves against the silver grey sky; the sudden dip down where, if one were nearer, the sea-line might be descried in the distance; the soft velvety sides of the downs; the fir woods in the hollows; the path by the river, where she and Margaret had oftenest walked when she was a child; the three very tall elms, in a field near the station, that Cecil had sketched one day. Then in a minute more the train had stopped, and Miss Berry's face, an odd mixture of welcoming smiles and tear stains, was peering in at the carriage window to look for her.

"My dear, I quite knew you would come," Miss Berry said after the first greetings and inquiries were spoken. "Shall we walk up to the house and leave the luggage to come after us? It is not far. I looked in on Mrs. Lutridge as I was coming down to the station, and told her that I felt pretty confident of

bringing you back; and, my love, I ventured—fearing that the unexpected sight of you at church to-morrow morning might be a shock—to call in at the Rectory and tell Mr. Pierrepoint about my having written to invite you. You would have been very much gratified, I think, my dear, if you had seen how he looked when your name was mentioned. He has this morning received a letter from poor Stephen, written before he had left Sir Cecil Russel's house to go on this unfortunate expedition, and sent by the longest route. It must have been like getting a letter from a dead person. Poor Mr. Pierrepoint had only just finished reading it when I came in, and I could see that he had been very much moved. He quite started when I told him you were coming, for it seems Steenie had mentioned you in this letter for the first time since he went away. I don't know exactly what he wrote; poor Mr. Pierrepoint could not command his voice to read the passage out loud, but at all events it is what has made him feel very kindly towards you, my dear. He said something about never losing sight of you again after this; and when I told him how pleased you were to see me a year ago, and how you loved every stick and stone belonging to Oldbury, the tears actually started into his eyes. He began to talk to me—yes, really to me—about his loneliness in the Rectory, and how, since his son left him, he has sometimes on winter evenings looked across at the lights in my room and had a sort of jealous feeling towards it, because Stephen used to prefer so much to be there with me when he was a boy, and has, since he has been so far away, written more affectionately about my little house than about anything in his own

home. It was well that the train was nearly due, and that I had to hurry away as quickly as I could, for I was so surprised I did not know what answer to make. Ah, there are Mrs. Adams and Miss James of the wool shop beckoning to you from across the road, but I will not let you speak to them, my dear, till you have been in and had some refreshment. I see you are tired, and that recognising so many faces of old friends is almost too much for you."

By the time Elsie had partaken of the refreshment Miss Berry had prepared for her, and rested on the sofa for half an hour, as her kind hostess insisted she should, the short November day was closing in, and Miss Berry was anxious to set out on the visit to Mrs. Lutridge she had promised Elsie should pay that evening.

"I am afraid it is a little inconsiderate in me to drag you out again so soon after your journey," she said apologetically; "but, you see dearest Mrs. Lutridge has never in her life been used to be kept waiting, and now that her circumstances and health are so sadly changed, anything at all like neglect strikes her in such a very painful light. I assure you—not that I mean to complain, for it is very gratifying to me that she should value my attention so highly, but I am obliged to be very circumspect. Ah! there is Mr. Lutridge himself coming across the road to fetch us. I am sadly afraid she has already thought it long. You will not be a minute putting on your bonnet, will you, my dear?"

"You will find Mr. Lutridge much aged and bowed down," Miss Berry whispered to Elsie as they re-

entered the sitting-room, where he was awaiting them, ready for their walk.

"Bowed-down" were hardly the right words to use, Elsie thought, when the tall, thin, upright old gentleman came forward and welcomed her cordially. His face was more deeply wrinkled and his hair more snowy white than formerly, but there was a nervous briskness and fussy alacrity in his manner now that rather took off from the signs of age. He moved and talked like a person who had been under constraint all his life, and could not get over his surprise at being able to speak and act for himself.

"Yes, it was quite his own idea to call in on his way home from the bank, and hurry their movements a little. He knew how anxious Mrs. Lutridge was, and so he had taken it upon himself. It was quite necessary, he was sorry to assure Miss Blake, for him to take these little arrangements upon himself now. Mrs. Lutridge used to think of everything, but she was no longer the active, independent person she had once been; there was a great change—a sad change—a very sad change," he kept repeating to himself smilingly, as he stood rubbing one hand over the other before Miss Berry's fire. "But had they not better be moving?"

The Lutridges lived now in a little house in the lower part of the town, beyond the river; and as Elsie passed down the High Street she could not help noticing how, even in the deepening twilight, passers-by lingered and turned round, and how the shopmen and women came and stood out at their doors to look curiously after her. Before she reached the Lutridges' door at least a dozen people, with some of whom she

had never exchanged word before, stopped her to claim acquaintance, and congratulate themselves and her on her return to the town.

Busy, gossiping, kind-hearted, fickle Oldbury had adopted her as a central object of interest now. There was hardly anybody in the place who had not heard of her coming, and who was not busy making up stories about her, investing her with a reflected halo of interest from the uncertain fate of one whom just then they were all resolved to make a hero of. It was a great sensation for Oldbury to have one of its own townsmen concerned in a public event about which all the newspapers in the kingdom were writing; and this inkling of an unhappy love story in which their hero was involved added not a little to the general excitement.

"No wonder he went out to China rather than promise to give her up" (that was the version of the history in vogue for the hour), people whispered to each other as they followed with their eyes Elsie's graceful figure passing down the street. There had always been people in Oldbury ready to stand up for Elsie's beauty, but it had never struck them so forcibly as it did just now.

The inside of Mrs. Lutridge's house was the first place that gave Elsie a hint that time had not stood still in Oldbury since she left the place. She and Miss Berry were shown into a little dark sitting-room down-stairs, while Mr. Lutridge went to inquire if Mrs. Lutridge was ready to receive her visitors, and the five daughters, one after the other, dropped in to shake hands with Elsie. They had all lost their youthful looks very early. Mrs. Williams, the married daughter, who, with her two children, was now on a long visit

to her parents, sat in an arm-chair in one corner of the room, rocking a crying baby to sleep, and taking very little notice of any one. Pretty Miss Ursula, very worn and faded, and with a permanent frown fixed between her plaintive blue eyes, was carrying on an intermitting struggle with the elder child for the possession of her work-box.

"These children get hold of and spoil everything," she explained, in a feebly complaining tone to Elsie; "and we dare not attempt to control them in any way, for poor Mamma always takes their part, and expects us to give up everything to them. She seems quite to have forgotten now how particular she used to be with us when we were children. It's strange how very inconsistent people can be. I am afraid you may have to wait here some time, poor Mamma is so very changeable. She was impatient to see you this morning, but since dinner she has fallen into one of her silent moods, and snaps one up if one says a word. One really never knows what to expect, and it makes one's life very trying."

At length Mr. Lutridge returned, and took Elsie into another room, where Mrs. Lutridge was reclining on an invalid sofa. She started half upright as they entered, and looked eagerly at Elsie. Her eyes had the old sharp, questioning glance in them from which Elsie used to shrink away when she was a child, but the rest of the face was much changed. Her lips, which used to meet firmly together in a happy smile of self-complacency, trembled and twitched nervously as she was preparing to speak.

"Put a chair close to the sofa for Miss Blake," she said, addressing her husband in a querulous voice,

"and then do go back to the sitting-room down-stairs. I heard all the girls go in one after the other, and I know they'll begin chattering to Miss Berry as soon as they are alone with her, telling her all sorts of things, and complaining of me. Do go down and keep them quiet while I talk to Miss Blake; I sha'n't be able to think of what I want to say to her if I am worrying myself with wondering what is going on down-stairs."

Mr. Lutridge prepared to obey, but before he could close the door behind him a sound of voices in animated conversation was distinctly heard from below. Mrs. Lutridge paused in a sentence she had begun to Elsie to listen.

"Yes," she said in a bitter tone, "that is always the way; they never any of them have anything to say to me, though I lie here all day long, and never get any change; but if a visitor, who can go about where she likes, comes in, they find their tongues fast enough. Young people are very ungrateful; one wears one's self out acting for the best for them, and when one is quite laid aside they only think how they can take advantage of it to get the most of their own way. I don't say that one's plans have always turned out as one hoped and expected; but even when misfortunes have come of them, it is not for the young to judge their elders' doings harshly. They should remember that they took responsibility on themselves for their advantage."

The first part of the sentence was murmured half to herself, but as she went on she sat up a little higher on the sofa and again fixed eager, questioning eyes on Elsie's face. Her voice sounded harsh and

hard, but the hand she put out to emphasize her words, in her old manner, shook painfully.

Elsie left her seat and came and knelt down by the side of the sofa, for she was trembling too much to sit still; her soft eyes had a tender pleading look in them. She read on Mrs. Lutridge's flushed, agitated countenance the struggle that was going on in her mind—anxiety and remorse fighting against her old habit of self-justification; and she feared most of all to lose a word of what she had come so far to hear.

"I shall not blame you," she said softly, "for anything you planned or did for his good, even if it was against me. I will try hard to believe you did it for the best, and never to blame you, if only you will tell me the whole truth now. You know what I mean. You can tell me exactly what he wrote now, when my knowing it cannot make any difference to any one."

"It would not have made any difference at the time," Mrs. Lutridge interrupted, in a sharp, pained voice; "that is just what I want you to explain to everybody. It ought not to have altered anything if you had received Stephen Pierrepoint's letter. If I were not so weak and nervous, I should see it clearly, and not trouble myself about a trifling circumstance that has, in reality, nothing to do with our present trouble. I was overcome when the news came. Miss Berry should not have acted so promptly; it would have been much better if you had never come."

"But you will tell me, now I am here, about the letter?" Elsie pleaded. "A letter, was it not, from him, that you were to have given me?"

"It was a very foolish, inconsiderate letter; not at all the sort of letter his father, who entrusted it to me

to deliver, believed it to be. I shall always maintain he was not justified in writing it; I shall say so to every one, even if—" A sudden quiver of emotion passed over her face, and she added in an altered, excited tone of voice, "But I wish—oh, I do wish Stephen Pierrepoint had never left England! You might just as well have written to ask him to stay at home without getting his letter. Young people do such unheard-of things now-a-days. They don't stand on ceremony about their friends' consent. My son has acted far worse to me than Stephen Pierrepoint would have done if he had married you against his father's advice; but I don't wish that my son had died first. When I was most angry with him, I never said anything of the kind."

There was a troubled, wandering look in her eye as she spoke, and Elsie began to despair of ever getting an answer to her question.

"I did not know that Stephen Pierrepoint intended to leave England till after he had sailed," she said. "How could I have done anything? Do you really mean that he wrote to tell me? If you will give me the letter now, I will never complain of you for keeping it so long, and making me think him unkind all these years. I have not often blamed him, and so it will not be so hard to forgive you, if only you will tell me all now."

"I have not got the letter now. I should not have kept it back all this time if I had had it by me. I was taking it to you, and your Aunt Margaret refused to let me see you; and then, while I was holding it in my hand looking at the writing, a gust of wind blew it into the river. Elsie Blake, don't look at me so;

fixing your eyes in that dreadful way. I did it for the best; and your having his letter would not have altered what has happened since. I wish to tell you the whole truth, that you may answer me quite fairly; that is why I sent for you. The writing was so large, and the envelope so thin, I could not help reading a sentence or two and guessing more. It was about his going out to China he wrote. He said he would stay in England if he could be of any use to you; if it would comfort you in your sorrow to know that he was near watching over you, even if he were not able to see you often. You could not have been so selfish as to accept such a sacrifice. You would not have let him injure his prospects, and offend his father and uncle, for your sake. You are a good girl, and you could not have foreseen what has happened. You would have sent him from you, even if you had had his letter offering to stay."

There was a long pause. Elsie could not find any words to answer. She covered her face with her hands.

"He would have stayed for me. He might, through a word of mine, have been near me now," she whispered low to herself. She could not tell whether it was great joy or great pain that made her heart swell as if it were bursting. To her, love was so much more than life, death such a much less formidable separation than estrangement, that the certainty of her lover's faithfulness overweighed every other thought for the moment. Dead or not, he was hers—always would be hers now! She need never have another unkind thought of him—another painful doubt of the reality of his love.

Mrs. Lutridge dragged away her hands impatiently at last, and was puzzled by the strange triumphant look of the tear-wet face she peered down into.

"Why don't you speak? I think you might answer me since you have come so far, and given me the agitation of saying so much. I can't bear people to cry in that quiet way; it shows a sort of sullenness that is worse than anything. Tell me what you would have done if you had had that letter."

"It will only hurt you if I answer," Elsie said hesitatingly. "I was selfish then, and very, very miserable. I should have asked him to stay. I should not have been able to believe it would have been bad for him; and whatever else had happened, we should have trusted each other all these years; we should have had that happiness. It is past now. I will try hard to forgive you—try to think it was not your doing; that all has been ordered rightly; but I can't talk to you any more to-day. I had rather go away now, if you please."

She rose quickly and went to the door, but paused when she had opened it to look into the room again. Mrs. Lutridge was lying back on the sofa very pale, with her two hands pressed tightly over her heart.

"I am very sorry for you," Elsie faltered. "Can I do anything for you? I will stay if you like, or shall I send some one?"

"No, no, I had rather be left alone. I can hear the girls talking and laughing downstairs now you have opened the door. Mr. Lutridge could not have gone down when I asked him. I wish you would go, and take Miss Berry away with you, and then there will be silence enough in the house. I am disappointed

in you, Elsie Blake. You are not such a sensible, right-thinking girl as I hoped to find you. I shall not want to see you again. You may go back to London as soon as you like. Even if I change my mind and send for you to-morrow, you need not come, for it will never give me any pleasure now to see you."

CHAPTER XIX.

Suspense.

MRS. LUTRIDGE did change her mind, and sent for Elsie to come again to her before twenty-four hours were over. And in spite of the previous prohibitions, Miss Berry advised Elsie to obey the summons. "Dearest Mrs. Lutridge had a way of desiring people never to come near her again, and then of sending in a hurry for them, but nobody in Oldbury now thought of being offended by her little peculiarities," she explained.

Elsie's second visit was a more amicable one than the first, and it came to be a custom during the month she remained in Oldbury that she should spend some hours of each day seated by the sofa of the invalid lady. Mrs. Lutridge scolded her a good deal, and asked her embarrassing questions about her feelings and intentions towards Stephen Pierrepoint, if he ever should return in safety to England. But she grew fond of her in her own way, and seemed to derive so much benefit from her visits that the Miss Lutridges united in a pathetic entreaty that Elsie would never get angry or be driven away by anything their mother might say.

"It was such an immense relief to *them*," they explained with unconscious selfishness, "for poor Mamma to have found some one fresh to pour out all her old

complaints to. It was almost always the same story, and they were so tired of hearing it, and did find it so difficult to think of any new answer to make."

Elsie found that answering Mrs. Lutridge was not a chief necessity; to sit still with an acquiescing expression of face while she talked was generally all that was required. Elsie was at all times a good listener, and under present circumstances she proved the very best that could have been found for the nervous, petulant invalid. It really did not weary her to hear the same troubles detailed again and again, and to travel over the incidents of the last three years with her companion step by step, and listen while she analysed all the pain they had brought her. She could slip her soft hand into Mrs. Lutridge's with as genuine a movement of sympathy at the twentieth time of hearing a sharp grief described as at the first. She had been living with the Oldbury people ever since she had left them in a blind sort of a way, and now the hearing of the events that had actually occurred among them seemed to her like the lifting up of a veil that had been hiding her true life from her. She could only feel weary as people are wearied with living their own lives and pitying themselves. And when Stephen Pierrepoint's name came into the conversation, as it frequently did, it never occurred to her to attribute Mrs. Lutridge's extreme anxiety about his fate to remorse for the share she had had in sending him away. It seemed to her so perfectly natural that she should be anxious. The only unnatural thing was that any one in Oldbury could speak or think of anything but of what news the next mail would bring.

There was another person in Oldbury besides Mrs.

Lutridge, who was strongly attracted to Elsie just at this time by her power of sympathetic listening.

Mr. Pierrepoint had much sympathy pressed upon him by his parishioners and friends during these days of anxious suspense; but among all those who professed to share his anxiety, he found no one but Elsie Blake to whom he could talk freely of his hopes and fears without now and then getting a look or word that betokened a less absorbed interest than the theme, in his estimation, deserved.

All the Oldbury people really cared a great deal about Steenie Pierrepoint, and were very anxious to know whether he was alive or dead. But then they had a great many other things to think of. They would forget precisely how many days and hours must elapse before fresh intelligence could be received; they were capable of hazarding conjectures which betrayed a strange ignorance of the exact circumstances that were likely to imperil or secure his safety. There was only Elsie Blake who listened always with just the right look of breathless interest on her face, when he recapitulated his reasons for hoping still against all adverse opinions; who never made a mistake, or forgot anything that had ever been said on the subject; and whose low uttered replies showed full comprehension of what he was feeling, and had the true ring of sympathy in them.

There had been some embarrassment about their first meeting. When Mr. Pierrepoint entered Miss Berry's little sitting-room the day after Elsie arrived, and found her there, he was a good deal agitated; he turned away abruptly after shaking hands with her, and stood silent for some minutes in the window recess

before he could recover his self-command. Elsie, on her side, was much too frightened to speak a word to him while he stayed. But after that first meeting was got over they fell into habits of intimacy very quickly.

Mr. Pierrepoint came regularly every afternoon to Miss Berry's house, and sometimes Elsie went back to the Rectory with him, and paced up and down the elm-tree walk in the garden while the twilight was falling. It was wonderful how instinctively they each seemed to understand what the other was feeling and thinking about.

As the day that was to end suspense drew near, Mr. Pierrepoint's inclination to discuss probabilities as to the news it would bring lessened, and at last ceased altogether; and then Elsie could sit or walk by his side in absolute silence, understanding without words how low the light of hope was flickering in his heart as the feared yet longed-for moment approached—conveying to him by a silent hand-clasp at night, by a mute glance in the morning, her mingled congratulation and condolence that another dreadful, hopeful twelve hours had actually been lived through by them both.

On the day before that on which the news was likely to arrive, Mr. Pierrepoint and Elsie took a long walk together in the afternoon. They had both been too feverishly restless all day to sit still for many minutes together; nothing but exercise out of doors could make the hours endurable.

They walked side by side and almost in silence a long way out of the town, and came back by the river,

and up through the steep hill fields, into the churchyard. Elsie had previously paid several visits to the churchyard, and now when she had stood for a moment or two by her grandmother's grave Mr. Pierrepoint led her to another mound, and pointed out the inscription on the head-stone. He had never taken any one to his wife's grave before, not even his son. "To-morrow," he said, in a low voice to Elsie as they turned away, "we shall know—I shall know—whether or not this is all I have on earth. If our fears are realized, there will not be even another grave." Then, having once broken silence, he talked to her all the rest of the way home of his son, not, as he had done hitherto, of the chances for or against his being still alive, but of Stephen himself; of the early days when he in his loneliness and sorrow had wished and had not been able to make himself an acceptable companion to his child; of how he had looked forward for years to some time when he and his son should live more together, and be more to each other than they had ever yet been; and of the blank he should feel if to-morrow told him that such a season could never possibly come to him. People might think that the Rectory would not be emptier than it had been lately. Yes, it would be emptied of all the hopes and visions he had filled it with for more than twenty years. He had been dwelling on the prospect of his son's return more hopefully than usual during the six months that preceded the arrival of the bad news; he had allowed himself to reckon on it as he had never done before. Elsie almost envied him for having had these months of expectation and hope.

"Whatever we hear to-morrow," Mr. Pierrepoint

said, as they parted on Miss Berry's doorstep, "you will always be a daughter to me after this."

Elsie never quite knew how the next day passed. The morning post hour arrived and brought no letter. Mr. Pierrepoint sent a message across to say that he had not heard; but he did not make his appearance in Miss Berry's sitting-room all day. It was too rainy for Elsie to go out. She did not attempt to employ herself. She sat still, feeling nothing but the blankness of disappointment; her thoughts occupied with dread of having to undergo again such a moment as she had undergone that morning, while she watched the postman giving in his letters at the Rectory gate.

Miss Berry drew down the blinds, and shut the house up early, with a vague idea of making the next day come quicker by so doing. Elsie was mechanically lighting Stephen's lamp, when a quick, tremulous knock came at the door. Miss Berry flew to open it, and Mr. Pierrepoint entered impetuously. He strode up to Elsie without seeing Miss Berry, and placed a folded paper in her hands.

"Read," he said in a hoarse voice; "I dare not. It's a telegram from the Foreign Office, just come."

Elsie tore the paper open and read,—"Stephen Pierrepoint is safe, and with his friends." She could only whisper the words, for all the blood seemed to have rushed from her heart while she was in the act of opening the paper. Safe—safe! For a minute they all three—Mr. Pierrepoint, Miss Berry, and Elsie—stood staring at the word with fixed, frightened eyes, as if they expected it would fade away or change into another. Then slowly the two most concerned realized

their great joy. Mr. Pierrepoint took Elsie in his arms, and called her his dear daughter, and kissed her. She could not even cry for joy at first, the reaction was so great she could only stand trembling. It might so easily have been a different word she had had to read out, and the thought of the agony that might have been possessed her so strongly, that it was some time before she had power to grasp the certainty of happiness and make it real. She heard Mr. Pierrepoint speaking earnest, reverent words of thanksgiving; and as she sank on her knees by his side, the rush of joyful tears came, and her thoughts grew clear as they rose in gratitude for the deliverance that had been vouchsafed to them.

Miss Berry was the first to waken to recollections of the outside world. "Dearest Mrs. Lutridge!" she exclaimed suddenly. "What are we thinking of, to leave her all this time in suspense while we are relieved from anxiety? Mr. Pierrepoint! Elsie! Of course I don't mean to blame either of you, but I do wonder at myself. Positively it is a full hour since the telegram came, and no one in the town knows the happy tidings but ourselves, unless, indeed, Caroline listening at the door, as she naturally will have done, has caught up something, and spread the news. If you will excuse me, I will put on my bonnet at once; or perhaps we had better all go in a body together to Mrs. Lutridge's house, and enjoy the delight of making her as happy as ourselves."

Elsie would gladly have excused herself from joining in the expedition, but Mr. Pierrepoint declared he must return at once to the Rectory to write the good news to Lady Selina Deane before the last post went

out, and she did not like to leave Miss Berry to walk alone.

In another quarter of an hour they turned out into the lamp-lit street, but somehow or another the good news had already got wing, and before they reached Mrs. Lutridge's house a triumphant peal of bells burst out from the church-tower, and carried rejoicing into every house in Oldbury, for everybody was thinking of Steenie, and understood at once what the joyful clamour meant to tell them. Mr. Pierrepoint did well to hurry over his letter, for his door was besieged all the rest of the evening with visitors longing to hear and congratulate, and satisfy themselves by seeing the telegram with their own eyes. Steenie had always been a great favourite with the townspeople of all degrees, and Mr. Pierrepoint felt as if he learned to know his son better than he had ever done before, as he listened to the stories of him in his childhood and boyhood, which his rich and poor friends could not refrain from telling that evening in the excitement of their joy at the tidings of his safety.

The walk to and from Mrs. Lutridge's house that dark evening, while the bells were pealing overhead, and people were gathering in joyous groups in the streets, and her heart was dancing in time to the music and laughter, was all the rest of her life a radiant memory to Elsie. In the far distant lands in which it is now her lot to live, the scene will often come back to her suddenly, and bring a beautiful light to her eyes, and a happy smile to her lips that puzzles bystanders. The tropical scenery and the dark faces, and the hot, breathless atmosphere round her, for a moment or two give place to the identical sights and sounds

and sensations of that hour. She sees and feels it all again: the irregular lamp-lit street, the cloudy sky, the chill November air, the happy faces, the clear, sweet music of the bells, and the tumult of joy in her own heart. It is a great gift in a life to have one such brilliant hour to look back upon. The delight of it is hardly grasped at the time; human capacity of feeling fails in supreme moments of joy or pain. The sense of reality slips from us, and we seem to be suffering or rejoicing in a dream. It is afterwards in looking back that the distinct vision comes, and we find that the hour's experience has stamped itself ineffaceably on our souls, darkening or brightening them for all the rest of our lives.

The next morning brought a soberer, more comprehending thankfulness—a thankfulness that was touched with awe and sorrow too, when the letters and newspapers arrived, and full particulars of Stephen's adventures, and of the dreadful fate of some of his companions in captivity, came to be known. A shade of sadness was cast over Mr. Pierrepoint's and Elsie's rejoicings as they read the heartrending account of the cruelties to which that division of the captured party to which Stephen belonged had been subjected. His knowledge of the Chinese language had procured him somewhat better treatment than had been dealt to his companions; and he was the only European of the party who survived to be brought back to the camp with the remnant of their Sepoy escort, after the vigorous measures of Lord Elgin had frightened the Chinese General into wishing to atone for the treachery of which his subordinates had been guilty.

Mr. Pierrepoint brought all the Chinese letters and

newspapers to Miss Berry's parlour, and gave them to Elsie to open and read to him. There was a short note from Stephen, written on the evening of his release. He made light of his own share of suffering; but Elsie shuddered as she read. It was plain enough that there was a great deal kept back, "to be talked out," Stephen wrote, "some evening when he should be sitting quietly over the fire in the old library at Oldbury; just then he confessed he was too much shaken by all he had gone through, and by the sad fate of his late companions, to be able to write much."

There was also a long letter from Cecil to Mr. Pierrepoint, which Elsie was told to read. The first part had been written at Shanghai, after news of Stephen's capture had reached Sir Cecil and his daughter. It was a chronicle of the days of suspense —each evening a few lines recording the rumours of the day; the more or less of hope or fear that had come to them, very carefully and fearfully worded always, evidently with the thought constantly in the writer's mind that her words might be read when every hopeful expression would seem a mockery of the reader's certainty of sorrow. In the middle came a break. The rebel army was threatening Shanghai; and Cecil was hurried away by her father, and forced to take refuge with the other European ladies and children in the town, on board the English men-of-war that guarded the harbour, while her father stayed in the town to give what help he could in protecting English property. Cecil's despair at leaving her father in danger evidently obliterated every other feeling at that time. The few lines with which she had intended to conclude her letter were almost too confused and

tear-blotted to be made out even by Elsie's quick eyes.

But Cecil had opened her letter a few days later, and added a postscript before it was sent off. All was quiet again. The rebels had occupied the town and gone away, having effected little injury to any one. She was with her father again, and the news of Stephen's safety had reached them. There was not time or room for more than a sentence of fervent, wondering thankfulness at his escape. Stay, on minute inspection Elsie found another postscript squeezed up in very small writing in a corner. She began reading, and before she had gone far, stopped short in dire confusion and dismay. "Papa says, that after all this we shall most likely come home soon—that is to say, at the very first moment when he can, consistently with his duty, get away. He is very much knocked up himself with all the hard work he has had; and Stephen's health is sure to suffer from what he has gone through in that fearful prison. Nothing but home will set either of them right again. By the way, I wish you would find out and let me know before we come back whether or not it is true that Elsie Blake is married to Richard Lutridge. You will think it odd that I should ask such a question at such a time as this, but I should like to have it answered before we set out for England. The voyage won't do Stephen the good that is expected from it if he is dreading bad news at the end; and if your answer is what I hope, I am certain that he will recover twice as fast."

Elsie paused when she came to her own name; but Mr. Pierrepoint got up and read the remaining

clause of the sentence over her shoulder. When she had recovered from her confusion enough to look up, she saw an amused smile on his face.

"This is the second time I have been asked to contradict that curious report," he said; "and my letter to Stephen with a satisfactory negative was started on its way to Shanghai a week ago. I believe what that letter contains will be more effectual in raising Stephen's spirits than the mere matter-of-fact answer Cecil asks for."

Elsie felt a little less at ease with Mr. Pierrepoint after this incident. His manner to her did not change when the first burst of joyful feeling on hearing the good news was over, but she could no longer be quite the same to him. She could not now let him talk to her of Stephen, and take her interest for granted, as comfortably as she had done in the days of suspense.

"After all," she kept asking herself, "how could he and Cecil ever have believed for a moment that I had married Richard Lutridge? How their thoughts of me must have changed! Can they possibly care much for seeing again a person of whom they have such a poor opinion?"

In the happiest times people generally contrive to find some pin-point weapon with which to sting themselves away from too giddy a height of content; and this question served the purpose for Elsie. It came into her mind when Mr. Pierrepoint spoke most kindly to her, and when Miss Berry indulged in visions of having everybody she most cared about settled in Oldbury. It was almost a relief when at the end of the week a letter arrived from Margaret begging her to return to London immediately. She had already

been away longer than they had at first anticipated, and her grandfather missed her sadly, Margaret wrote. Miss Berry was obliged to give way to this urgency, and, to Elsie's intense surprise, Mr. Pierrepoint insisted on making a journey to London on purpose to give her back himself into her aunt's charge. He would not hear anything about her being quite able to travel alone, or of her having always of late years had to take care not only of herself, but of her infirm grandfather. He seemed to consider that circumstances were greatly changed with her now. She had grown to be a personage of great importance in his eyes, and must consent to be made much of.

CHAPTER XX.

A last Walk under the Elms.

INEVITABLE delays occurred. Public business obliged Sir Cecil Russel to remain at Shanghai longer than he had expected; and as his health had been much impaired by the anxiety of the last few months, he could not dispense with Stephen Pierrepoint's services. Every letter that came from Stephen or Cecil to Oldbury was full of impatient longings for home; but it was not until the autumn of the ensuing year that news of their having actually sailed for England reached the Rectory. And even then Mr. Pierrepoint's joy in the prospect of their return was somewhat damped by a passage in Sir Cecil's last letter, which expressed his belief that Stephen had not taken his final leave of the country, for that the prominent part he had lately taken in the business of the consulate, and the great ability he had shown, would probably lead to his appointment to the post Sir Cecil intended to resign.

Meanwhile several changes had occurred in Elsie's life. In the spring of the year, old Mr. Blake died suddenly while sleeping in his chair, with no one but his grand-daughter near him. The sleep of life slid into the death sleep so gradually and tranquilly, that for some time Elsie did not suspect the change that had taken place.

His death broke up the house in Wilton Street. Margaret carried out a project she had long entertained, and became a member of a small community of women who, without parade or distinction, were devoting their time and means to missionary work in the poorest and most neglected districts of London—"Sisters of the Poor" in reality, as well as in name; and Elsie went to live with her grandmother, Mrs. Neale, till Stephen Pierrepoint should come to claim her.

Their first meeting, after so many years of separation, took place in the gloomy house through which Elsie had once wandered with such despair in her heart.

She was sitting upstairs in Mrs. Neale's room, reading a novel aloud to her, when a little pencil note in Stephen Pierrepoint's handwriting was brought to her. She had had no opportunity of consulting the newspapers to see if the vessel by which he was expected was telegraphed, and she was wearying for news.

"I landed only a few hours ago," the note said, "and I must be at Oldbury to-night! Will you not see me at once?"

Mrs. Neale, impatient at the long interruption to the reading, looked over Elsie's shoulder and read the words aloud before the handwriting had left off dancing before her eyes.

"Yes, of course you will go," she said. "Go down and get it over. You may as well give me the book, and then you need not hurry. I shall live very contentedly with the heroine through all the vicissitudes of her history, while you are acting out a

single page or so of yours down there. It belongs to the difference in our ages, my dear—the vicarious stage of love-making is the most enjoyable of the two, I assure you; and you will come to it by and by. What! I am to kiss you before you go! There! Don't lose that little bit of rose colour in your cheeks before you reach the drawing-room, and he will see at a glance that you are twenty times handsomer than you were four years ago, and be very much obliged to me for having routed you out of the quaint way of dressing Margaret had brought you up to. When you have had your first talk, bring him up for me to see what he is like. Now go; the longer you linger, the worse it will seem."

Elsie ran down-stairs, but paused with her hand on the lock of the sitting-room door. The four years stretched themselves out in her thoughts like a great plain of distance, and the recollections behind looked dim and unreal. It would be, after all, a stranger's face—to whom she should look strange—that would confront her when she opened the door. She heard quick, impatient steps pacing the room within, and in desperation she turned the handle and entered. Then, in one moment, the four years seemed to fall away from her as if they had never been; all the pains and anxieties and doubts of them wiped out from her soul, done away with for ever. She was on the sunny hill-side again at Oldbury, and the Stephen Pierrepoint who came forward, with both hands stretched out to meet her, and a glow of happiness and love on his face, was the triumphant young lover with whom she had joined hands and walked down the hill, in the autumn sunshine, and with whom she had parted

at the gate of the old Oldbury home, it might have been yesterday. She would have said it must have been only yesterday, but for the sense of rest and quiet thankfulness that filled her heart as she looked into his face and felt his arms round her: such deep repose and thankfulness as can only be felt in moments of fulfilled hope, after years of weary waiting and struggles with despair.

For some months after that day Elsie's life became rather a difficult problem for her to manage; it was almost impossible to satisfy the conflicting claims that were made on her time. Mrs. Neale, pleading that she was soon to lose her altogether, was more exacting of attention from her than she had ever been before; and Stephen and Cecil were very resolute against her being involved in what they called a new servitude.

"She had been somebody's slave all her life!" Stephen declared; and, by way of vindicating her freedom, he was always coming down upon her at unexpected times, and insisting on her leaving whatever she might be doing with Mrs. Neale to come out with him, or spend an hour in Cecil's company.

Mrs. Neale would have been reasonably willing to concede Elsie, at certain stated times, to her lover and his friends; but Stephen could never be brought to acknowledge that any one had the smallest claim on her time or attention but himself. He and Mrs. Neale were always quarrelling over her; yet, in spite of their disagreements, they conceived a strong liking for each other's company. Stephen's inroads into the house, and the fresh interests and life he brought there, did Mrs. Neale good. She was roused out of

the apathy in which she had been sunk for years, and became capable of enjoying some of her old pleasure in society again. In talk with Stephen or Sir Cecil, little sparks of the sprightliness and wit for which she had been famous once were called out. She was the charming, fascinating hostess once more; and she was not insensible to the pleasure of exercising her long-disused powers. She was persuaded to leave her boudoir and come down-stairs; the dismal shut up rooms were renovated; sunshine and life and cheerful associations were let in to dispel the brooding, death-like atmosphere that had reigned in them so long. Elsie had the satisfaction of believing that when she left the household could not possibly fall back into quite its old melancholy condition again.

The wedding was fixed to take place in February. Meanwhile Stephen's appointment to the post his uncle resigned was secured. It was settled that he and Elsie were to leave England for China at the end of the summer, which they were to spend with Mr. Pierrepoint in Oldbury; and Cecil and her father were busy discussing and finally arranging a plan for their future life in England.

Mr. Pierrepoint was a party to all their consultations; but somehow Stephen was so constantly in London at Mrs. Neale's house, or so occupied in discoursing on Elsie's perfections when he and his cousin were alone together, that Cecil never had an opportunity of telling him all she wished about the new life opening before her, till one mild February afternoon, two days before the wedding, when he and she chanced to be at Oldbury together, and were at leisure to spend the interval between lunch and its growing

too dark to stay out of doors in pacing the elm-tree walk together. Then Cecil recounted, more circumstantially than she had hitherto done, the reasons that had induced her father to give up his London house, and how they had come to decide on establishing themselves in Oldbury.

Stephen listened to a good deal of what she said in silence, with only slight gestures of dissent now and then, when she drew lively pictures of the enjoyment she expected to have, and the changes for the better she was to work in Oldbury society.

"No, no, Cecil," he observed at last; "I have not said a word hitherto, but I hope you have not thought me so selfishly absorbed in my own happiness as not to have seen what you have been doing. It would be too absurd to attempt to thank you; I can only be dumb before such an immense obligation. It is for my father's sake you are giving up so much—I understand that; yet I know you feel that by settling here and taking my place with my father you are removing the one cloud—the fear I sometimes feel that my marriage with Elsie, which we both see makes it undesirable for me to be much at Oldbury, is a bad thing for my father, and will prevent my being the comfort to him I ought to be. You make it all right for us, and send us away quite happy."

"You mean to say that you would not have left England again; that you would have chosen some other profession, and contrived to be a great deal here in Oldbury with him, if, if——"

"If—we may as well say it out at once—if Elsie's family history had not been what it is. My father has accepted her as his daughter, thoroughly and

generously—he has quite got over any prejudice against her he might once have felt—yet I don't think we could reasonably expect, that if we had settled down here annoyances would not have recurred. Even if it had not been so, the facts of the case remain the same; and I cannot think the right way is to ignore or forget them. I feel I am taking an obligation on myself. There will now be something to redeem. I cannot sit down to a quiet, comfortable life in England. I want to go where I see the best chance opened out before me of rendering some public service, of possibly earning some honourable distinction that will in a degree compensate for the one shameful recollection I shall share, and that my children, if I have any, must inherit. The desire to lessen that evil will always be an additional spur to exertion with me. I cannot think lightly of it or forget it, nor can Elsie. You have always known how I felt about this."

"Yes; and, Stephen, ever since I knew the history of Elsie's life I have wished to help you to lift the doom of sorrow from her. If it can only be done by sharing it, I want a little bit of the shadow to come on me too. I have not helped to bring about the marriage; it seems Prince Kung did you that service when he took you prisoner and all but murdered you; but if I am really making the marriage right, taking up the stitch of obligation that might have been dropped, that is better still. And you must not get it into your head that we are not going to enjoy ourselves here. Papa thinks he shall like the quiet of Oldbury; and if it suits him, of course I shall be happy."

"The advantage to my father of having you both settled near him is so immense that I can't find it in

my heart to say a word against it; but I am afraid you will both be thrown away here, and that you hardly know to what you are condemning yourselves. It *is* a sacrifice, and there is no use in attempting to talk me out of being grateful for it. How many vicarious sacrifices it takes to do away with the cruel results of one sin! Nothing but sacrifices seem to have power to do it."

"But I will not allow you to call our settling here a sacrifice; I mean it to turn out such an excellent, happy arrangement for every one."

"Well, at all events, there is one life that has been a long sacrifice. Do you know why Gilbert Neale will not be present to give his niece away the day after to-morrow?"

"Is he not coming to the wedding? I am sorry. I thought at one time he relented, and promised to give you his countenance."

"At one time; but something has happened to change his feelings since. He talked very openly to me last night, but I had heard the greater part of the story before from Elsie, and I believe there is no objection to my telling you. He and Margaret Blake were engaged to be married long ago. The engagement was broken off after Gilbert's brother's death, but he has never ceased to love her. While her brother lived he could only keep out of her way, but lately, since we returned to England, he has proposed to Margaret again, and she has refused him. Elsie took the refusal very much to heart; she is so sure that Margaret still thinks of the old times very tenderly. She wanted me to remonstrate, but I have never dared."

"I should think not indeed; it would have been great presumption in you. No one but Margaret herself could judge on such a subject. I can understand that it must seem impossible to her, after all she has suffered, after going down into such depths of pain, and being fitted for the work she has undertaken now by such bitter experience, to give that up, and go back to just such a luxurious, commonplace life at Connington as she would have had if she had never known any very great trial. It would seem such a waste—like cutting out the greater part of her life and making it of no use."

"But I don't see that. I don't see why she should not find use for all the high lessons experience of suffering has taught her, in what you are pleased to call commonplace married life."

"Yes, she might, but not at Connington—not with Gilbert Neale. He would have expected her to forget and put all the past away, as if it had never been, and content herself with the comfortable, pleasure-seeking life her neighbours were leading. Anything that marked her out, and turned people's thoughts to the painful part of her history, he would have disliked and resented. He has come out of his sorrow on quite a different side from Margaret; and however much alike they were once, there is a great gulf between them now. Margaret Blake is not a person to turn her back on the past. You ought to understand her, for you said just now you felt, in becoming the husband of Elsie Blake, that you took an obligation on yourself. Margaret feels the obligation far more strongly, and I think in a higher way. You are only thinking of wiping out the disgrace that might come

upon the descendants of this one family. Margaret does not think so much of the disgrace, as of the actual wrong done in the world by one of her own kin; she wants to make some little amends for that, by devoting her life to work among the neglected and fallen, hoping to redeem some from sin. She has no time to live for herself."

"I admire her present work as much as you can do, but Elsie cannot quite reconcile herself to the contrast she fancies there will be between her lot and her aunt's. She will always be picturing Margaret to herself nursing fever patients in damp cellars or stifling attics in Whitechapel and Shoreditch, while we are wandering about the Oldbury fields this summer."

"But Margaret Blake is far happier doing that than she would be paying morning calls, or giving dinner-parties at Connington, or even wandering about the summer fields with some one she loved as much as Elsie loves you. People are not all alike. Only look at Margaret Blake's face when she is talking about her work; what a radiance there is on it now. How different from the stony look it had when she was only bearing, and had not got to the work. I did think her life dismal then, when I did not know what was its meaning, and what it was fitting her for. There are some lots, like yours and Elsie's, that look complete from the first. Some people have beautiful, well-rounded lives given them to live out. Others seem to have for their share only supplementary lives, woven in here and there with other people's just to eke them out where they are wanting, but never quite blended with any one life, or taking a completed

form of their own. The supplementary lives don't look so satisfactory, but perhaps that is because we don't see enough of them; they are curves of grander circles that pass out of our ken."

"Well, you must let me wish you a complete small circle of your own for your life. I don't want you to be one of the grand curves, wandering off into sublime regions where we insignificant, happy people can't follow you. May I not wish for you some such crowning day in your life as I am to have the day after to-morrow?"

"No; don't trouble yourself to wish anything about me. We shall know well enough how to follow each other's lives in thought for some years to come at least. I shall always be able to see you and Elsie in the Government House at Shanghai, doing your best to make the rooms look homelike—taking your early rides up and down the horrible dusty parade, and looking out over the crowded harbour, and trying to think you get a sea-breeze."

"But I shall not be able to picture you at Laurel House, acting the distinguished part of leading lady of Oldbury. I perceive that Mrs. Lutridge has succumbed at once; she has not shown fight at all."

"Ah! I told you long ago I could manage Mrs. Lutridge, and I will astonish you now by confessing that I am actually getting to like her. She is very much altered; and after all, at the worst of times, she really wished to do good to her neighbours. She had higher aims in life than many people."

"That is not saying much. I am glad it is you and not I who have to deal with her in her fallen

condition. I could not be generous; her conduct about that letter was a little too bad. Perhaps after to-morrow I shall manage to forgive her; but when I think of all Elsie suffered, I am very savage still. The daughters are to be pitied; but don't be too compassionate even to them,—they will fasten themselves on you like incubi, and you will never have a minute to call your own."

"I shall manage; and, besides, they are not always going to live in Oldbury, all four of them. It is time the Connington romance came to an end. I mean to take it in hand."

"Poor Walter Neale! I really think that to give him Mrs. Lutridge for a mother-in-law is rather too severe a punishment to inflict on him for having once had the presumption to fancy himself in love with you."

"We will not discuss that point. There!—look up between the trees; do you see the silver thread of crescent moon in the sky—your moon and Elsie's? You will be walking up and down here together when it is a silver bow again, and Papa and I shall have started on the Italian tour we are to have before we settle down at Laurel House for the rest of our lives. Your father is calling you from the window. I will take just one more turn by myself before I go in."

Cecil left the shaded elm walk when Stephen entered the house and went to a more open part of the garden, from whence she could see part of the town of Oldbury hanging out its lights now, the irregular roof-lines broken here and there by groups of trees already showing the spring sap in their swelling

branches. It was a pretty, peaceful, thoroughly English-looking place, very pleasant to eyes that had wearied over the colourless, dusty sheen of Eastern cities.

There was both sadness and content in Cecil's heart as she looked. "Little city of my dwelling-place on this side the grave," she said to herself, quoting Jean Paul's address to Bayreuth. The words had a strange pathos to her, and unexpected tears started to her eyes. She dashed them away the next minute, smiling at herself. What was there to be pathetic about? It was not particularly likely after all that she and her father should go on living in Oldbury all the rest of their lives, and even if they did—— Cecil paused to consider the prospect steadily. She did not quite like to acknowledge it to herself, and yet there was an undefined feeling in her mind that the ceremony she was to witness the day after to-morrow was something of a crisis in her life too, and would make the plan of life to which women usually turn when they think of a change coming to them look distasteful to her. There was no one but herself to blame if she had formed an idea of what she wished the closest companionship of her life to be that was not to be realized, and found that she could not change it. What then? The even flowing life without any great event in it which she believed she saw stretched out before her, did not look grey, but very sunshiny and sweet. Her steps quickened, and her cheek glowed with the warmth that came to her heart as she pictured the years with her father, and planned how she would throw herself heart and soul into the interests his active mind would be sure to create round him

even here in Oldbury, and be so much in his work that he should never quite know how much failing health and coming infirmities were lessening his capacities for active employment. Then how much brighter her uncle's existence should be for her being at hand to supply the places that perhaps ought not to have been left vacant. There was something very sweet to her in the charge thus left her; it seemed to associate her in the work of reparation to which Margaret Blake had dedicated her life. There would be pain; her father's health was shattered, he was an old man long before the time, and there must always be pain in following and waiting on the steps of a declining life, however sacred and sweet the task may be. At the end of this slope, which Cecil hoped to smooth and brighten for the two relatives to whom the next years of her life were to be dedicated, there lay what must be a gulf of pain for her, at which she need not look just yet. What she did see was the path beyond it, not downwards, but upwards, stretching on to greater heights of self-conquest and endeavour, when, having no one of her own kindred to devote herself to, she could, as Margaret Blake had done, make kindred of all who suffered. Far off in the distance of her life she saw that possibility, and it shone upon her with a light that seemed to be reflected from Margaret Blake's face.

"How little I thought that summer when I first came to Oldbury, and used to wonder about her so much, that the prospect of growing like her would ever seem to me a hope to be struggled for," she said to herself. And just then Mr. Pierrepoint came to the library door and called to her to come in, and

she ran to the house, making up her mind that it should not be often she would allow herself leisure to live in anticipation through her whole life, in an idle hour.

THE END.

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